p. 63; Robin Briggs, *Witches and Neighbours: the Social and Cultural Context of European Witchcraft* (London: HarperCollins, 1996), esp. Chapter 10.

9

Comparative history

Stefan Berger

Historians compare. They cannot avoid it, unless they restrict themselves to listing dates and events. If history is more than chronology, any attempt to explain and interpret what has been going on in a particular place and at a particular time involves comparing it with what has been going on before or later, or at other places at the same time. Take, for example, explanations of the rise to power of the National Socialists in Germany. If we say that the weakness of democratic traditions in Germany contributed to the Nazis' success, we also say that the strength of democratic traditions elsewhere, say in Britain, helped prevent the rise of Fascism. Narrative structures depend on comparison but these comparisons are often implicit rather than explicit.

Calls for explicit comparative history are old, and attempts to formulate a specific theory are usually traced back to John Stuart Mill.[1] In the first half of the twentieth century, eminent theoreticians and practitioners of the comparative method included Marc Bloch, Max Weber, Otto Hintze, Henri Pirenne and Emile Durkheim. These pioneers were archipelagos in a sea of nationally constituted histories, in which the vast majority of historians found it difficult to transcend the study of the societies in which they had grown up. Yet, over the last twenty years, the practice of comparative history has taken off in many societies and cultures.[2] Scholarly exchange programmes have increased international contacts after 1945, and scholars now work in national contexts different to those in which they were raised. Globalization has also directed the historians' attention to past interlinkages and comparisons between different parts of the world.[3] If comparative history is practised more frequently today than ever before, it is not done to the same extent everywhere. One of its foremost practitioners in Britain, Geoffrey Crossick, argues that comparative history has had relatively little influence on historiographical research in Britain.[4] In the Cannadine debate about

British history, Neil Evans was one of the few contributors to demand more 'rigorous and empirically grounded' comparisons to deconstruct British history into 'the building blocks of regional and national distinctiveness within the British state' and to 'see it within the perspective of Europe and the whole Atlantic world'.[5] In America, by contrast, the comparative method has made a real difference.[6] Yet comparative history courses are also taught in British undergraduate programmes (e.g. on Fascism, particular decades, revolutions, labour movements and nationalism), and students are encouraged to write comparative essays. This chapter sets out to assist students taking courses in comparative history and to encourage them to work comparatively. For comparative history to succeed, it is essential, as Thomas Welskopp points out, to make it an integral part of a theoretically aware analytical history, rather than a specialist sub-discipline that stands apart from other forms of history writing and is only practised by the initiated few.[7] To widen the appeal of comparative history this chapter will, first, discuss different kinds of comparison. Second, it will summarize some of the benefits of comparative history. Third, it will analyse problems and pitfalls of the comparative method. Fourth, it will discuss the relationship between comparative studies and cultural transfer studies, and finally it will introduce an example of comparative history to demonstrate how comparisons work.

9.1 Different kinds of comparison

Comparisons often involve nation-states. The rise of professional history writing in the nineteenth century coincided with the rise of the nation-state. Historians looking to legitimate their nation-state[8] did so by comparing it – implicitly rather than explicitly – to other nation-states, identifying allegedly unique characteristics of their own which distinguished them from and made them superior to others. The legacy of transnational comparisons is so strong that we often forget that nations do not have to be our units of comparison. In fact, as economic historians particularly point out, regions might constitute better units of comparison.[9] Since they are less heterogeneous than larger nations, regional comparisons are possibly less vulnerable to reductionism. A micro-comparison can take account of the totality of structures, experiences and values in a way that is impossible for a macro-comparison. Yet total comparisons of social contexts are still rare. The larger the comparison, the more necessary it is to select particular aspects for comparison. In fact, some historians have attempted to compare across whole civilizations and cultures.[10] Some themes can indeed best be discussed in transcultural perspectives, e.g. multi-culturalism or cosmopolitanism. Max Weber famously compared diverse world religions and their impact on the evolution of specific economic orders.[11] As we can see from these brief remarks, comparisons have an important spatial dimension. We need to reflect on which

geographical units we wish to compare as it will influence the whole set-up of the comparison.

It is not only geography that matters. We also need to think about the purpose of the comparison. Most comparisons can be divided into two categories: individualizing and universalizing. Individualizing comparisons set out to demonstrate the uniqueness of one particular case by comparing it with others. They tend to be asymmetrical in that they use a variety of cases only to shed light on the one case that the comparison seeks to understand better. If one wants to examine 'American exceptionalism' or the German *Sonderweg*, or ask whether Britain really was 'the first industrial nation', then only comparison can establish what was specific about the particular history. Universalizing comparisons aim to identify similarities between cases. They are usually symmetrical in that they give equal weight to all cases compared. Jack Goody's comparison of family structures in Europe and Asia found similar domestic structures in this vast area.[12] Between these two ideal types of comparison are a range of hybrids. Charles Tilly has usefully distinguished between four types of comparison.[13] Encompassing comparisons are related to individualizing comparisons. They are primarily concerned with explaining differences between cases that share an overarching commonality. Nationalism studies, for example, are often concerned with delineating different ideas and types of nationalism while recognizing at the same time that all nationalisms are connected to one another.[14] Variation-finding comparisons are closer to universalizing comparisons. Here different cases are understood as variations of one particular phenomenon. Comparative Fascism studies often fall into this category. They assume that there is one phenomenon called Fascism, and proceed to discuss its variations through place and time. Barrington Moore's classic study on the origins of dictatorship and democracy started from the observation that agricultural societies seemed particularly vulnerable to Fascism, and set out to explore variations within this pattern.[15]

Individualizing comparisons and their variants are more common among historians, as they are more concerned with questions of the uniqueness of a particular time and place. Their strong historist, positivist and empiricist assumptions make historians partial towards complex analysis, which allows detailed understanding of particular contexts. They approach the evidence in as unbiased a manner as possible, and seek to reconstruct the past from the evidence that remains. Historical sociologists and geographers, in contrast, are happier with universalizing comparisons and their variants, as they habitually work at greater levels of abstraction. They are more willing to reduce historical complexity in order to answer specific questions for diverse societal contexts. However, as disciplinary barriers have fallen over the past decades, those differences have become less marked. On a basic level, one could say that comparativists are always interested in establishing both differences and similarities between cases.

The intention of the comparative historian is important for other reasons.[16] Historians undertake comparisons because they want to question national explanations, build typologies, stress historical diversity, encourage scepticism vis-à-vis global explanatory models, or contextualize and enrich research traditions of one society by exploring and contrasting them with research traditions of different societies. Many comparisons are concerned with highlighting the constructedness of historical identities. Often they endeavour to relativize notions of exceptionalism by demonstrating that identity is situational. A multiplicity of identities exists at any one given time: which one is foregrounded largely depends on the specific historical context. The emphasis in these cases is on the detachment of scholars from their object of enquiry. Yet other comparativists explicitly seek to teach the lessons of history. They may want to explain what went wrong in one particular society by contrasting its development with that of other societies. Or they may be concerned with highlighting the pioneering and model function of particular societies. This kind of comparative history is often informed by moral judgements. Their practitioners reject the assumption – still widespread among historians – that it is not the task of the historian to act as judge. Instead they point out that moral judgements cannot be avoided in the writing of history, as the nature of all knowledge is perspectival. A fact is only ever a fact within a specific framework of description. This not only allows for a plurality of true statements, it also means that the realm of facts cannot neatly be separated from the realm of values and hence morality. Factual statements already presuppose normative choices. They can be hidden (as is usually the case with historists) or they can be brought out in the open. Whichever is the case, knowledge is only possible within particular moral–normative–ideological 'horizons of expectation'.[17]

9.2 The promises of comparative history

Most historians have been drawn to comparative history because they want to obtain a better knowledge of their own society through comparison. Even where historians engaged in comparative history in order to understand other societies better, their interest was frequently motivated by a desire to learn from the experiences of others and to encourage adaptation of positive features of other societies. Having studied a problem or theme in different social contexts, they could draw up typologies of how different societies dealt with the same problem. They might also ask whether the same problem was present in different societies to a similar degree. Such an observation might have escaped the attention of historians who focused on one particular society. For example, the focus on national histories in Europe in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries hid from sight the fact that, beyond the boundaries of national states, something like a European experience

in economic, social, political and cultural life was developing.[18] The comparative method also allows for the identification of problems not evident from observation of a single societal context. Thus only through comparison with other countries have historians asked why there was no significant Marxism in the USA and Britain.[19]

Many comparativists have argued that there is no better test in history than comparison. As far back as 1895 Emile Durkheim saw comparison as the equivalent to the natural scientist's experiment, in which variables were isolated and causal relationships proven.[20] Even if we are today more sceptical than Durkheim about the 'scientificity' of history,[21] comparison does allow us to differentiate good causal explanations from bad ones. It has, for example, been fashionable to argue that it was, above all, the economic slump of the early 1930s that caused the rise of Nazism in Germany. Yet, the slump was just as severe in the USA, which did not face a serious Fascist challenge. But the USA did have a republic, established in 1776, with a much revered constitution from 1787/8. Germany, by contrast, was a republic only after 1918/19 and its constitution was at best tolerated. The slump is therefore unlikely to have been the only explanation for why Hitler came to power. Take another example: Comparisons allow linkage of the strong reception of Marxism in European working-class parties with the degree of state repression that these parties faced. The more repression they faced, the more likely it was that they would turn to Marxism as an explanatory framework for social and political developments.[22] Comparisons are able to test existing models and explanations, but they are equally capable of developing new models. Miroslav Hroch, for instance, compared the emergence of small-nation nationalism in central Europe and developed a model that can now be tested by further comparison.[23]

Comparisons may draw attention to the fact that similar outcomes, such as strikes, sometimes have different causes and follow different patterns.[24] Inversely, comparisons may account for how similar developments produced different results. Thus, in a classic of the genre, Alexander Gerschenkron explored the impact of industrialization on different societies. He found that late industrializers such as Germany, in which a belated take-off was followed by a sprint, experienced significant social and political problems. Similarly, John Breuilly demonstrated the initial appearance of liberal labour movements in Britain and Germany, and went on to explain why in Britain a liberal labour movement succeeded, whereas in Germany it soon lost out to a rising socialist movement.[25] Overall, developments in one country can be explained better by comparing them with developments in others. No other historical method is so adept at testing, modifying and falsifying historical explanation than comparison. No other method demonstrates so effectively the range of developmental possibilities. It allows historians to gain a vantage point outside one particular regional or national history, and makes history a less provincial undertaking.

9.3 Problems and pitfalls in comparative history

If the promises of comparative history are manifold, so are the problems connected with its practice. Four preconditions need to be fulfilled before successful comparisons can be made. First, the historian needs close familiarity with more than one social context. Second, comparativists need to reflect on spatial and time constraints. Third, they have to consider theoretical and conceptual frameworks for their comparison. Finally, they have to have a feeling for linguistic pitfalls in transnational comparisons involving more than one language. In the following I would like to expand on those four potential stumbling blocks.

The first point might seem obvious, but it is nevertheless important, as it forces us to recognize the immense work involved in gaining knowledge of archival sources and secondary literature in two or more social contexts. There is a particular problem with archival sources: rarely do we find comparable sources that exist in different societal contexts. Even if we deal with secondary literature alone, we must be aware of different research traditions. Historians have asked different questions in different societies. Different questions might produce different views of developments, structures, organizations and mentalities. So a comparison of historiographies must precede any historical comparison. Take, for example, the coalfields of the Ruhr and South Wales, where historians face the problem of a much more diverse and richer historiographical tradition for the former. The impression of greater diversity of experiences in the Ruhr might, after all, be the result of different historiographical traditions rather than of actual lived experience.[26] We also need to keep in mind that familiarity with more than one social context often cannot be achieved by reading about it. It is necessary to experience a different social context at first hand, which involves extended stays in other regions or countries. Looking at two social contexts we might find similar events and institutions in one context, but their mere existence might not tell us very much about their functioning, their relevance and their wider meaning in society. We might, for example, find that most nation-states have myths of origin. But that tells us little about their impact or function in different nation-states at different times. Careful contextualization of any phenomenon to be compared is necessary.

Contexts are provided in time and space, which brings us to the second precondition for comparative history: we need to be clear about our geographical and time boundaries. We need to justify our choice of geographical comparisons. Geographical boundaries are somewhat arbitrary; they have been defined in different contexts for different purposes. Borders must be treated with extreme caution; they do not define 'natural' units of comparison. Look again at the Ruhr and South Wales. The former has been divided into three zones of industrial development that, in several respects, had very different histories. South Wales includes

both the coalfield and the coastal strip with the important coal ports of Cardiff and Barry and cities such as Swansea and Newport. Even within the coalfield, the anthracite coalfield in the west differed significantly from the rest of the coalfield.[27] To presume that the geographical boundaries of the Ruhr and South Wales were fixed and self-evident is a dangerous illusion.

If geographical boundaries are rarely straightforward, we also need to attend to why the beginning and end points of our comparison are chosen. Time can be particularly tricky, as similar structures, institutions and ideas might develop at different times in different social contexts. Possible time-lags need to be taken into account in comparative studies. We must justify comparison of similar (synchronic comparisons) or different (diachronic comparisons) times for different social contexts. Synchronic comparisons are more usual, but not always the most appropriate. If labour movements, for example, are seen as reactions against rapid industrialization, it follows that since industrialization happens at different times in different social contexts, labour movements must be compared diachronically rather than synchronically.[28] The use of particular time caesuras and geographical boundaries influences the way in which particular events or structures are seen.

The next question to ask is: 'Which units of comparison do we choose for which end?' Theoretically, anything can be compared with anything. Everything depends on which theoretical and conceptual framework we choose for the comparison. This brings us to our third precondition. We must choose the cases that fit the question(s) we want to ask. The research question(s) might well be modified in light of our increasing knowledge about the units of comparison, but they form the basis of the theoretical and conceptual framework that structures all comparative work. Concepts are often interrelated. Comparisons that are concerned with establishing causal relationships between particular variables have to be aware of such dependencies. If, for example, we want to explain different degrees of nationalism in different countries, we cannot use notions such as enmity towards foreigners and willingness to defend one's country against foreign invasion as explanations, as they are related forms of nationalism. They can be used to indicate different degrees of nationalism but they do not explain the existence of nationalism.

Historical theories and concepts structure comparisons but are not free from agendas. Many comparative labour historians, for example, have assumed that the emergence and development of labour movements was tightly related to the industrialization process and to working-class formation.[29] In this they borrowed heavily from Marxist and Weberian theories of industrialization and the evolution of capitalism. The usefulness of such grand social theories for historical analyses has been questioned by postmodernism.[30] Postcolonial and subaltern perspectives have been wary of western developmental concepts and their

imperialist ambitions.[31] Edward Said's analysis of 'orientalism' has been immensely influential in explicating the West's construction of an image of the other (in his case, the Orient) by defining the terms of the debate through the use of concepts such as development or modernization.[32] For comparative history, these interventions constitute a serious warning: concepts, terminologies and theories must be used self-reflexively. Comparative historians need to consider the origins and politics of their concepts. No longer must they pretend that concepts can be used within a value-free scientific paradigm. Yet, comparativists need not be disheartened by postcolonial scepticism about western concepts. As Jürgen Osterhammel has pointed out, many western concepts and terms had already been transferred to non-western contexts before European colonization from the sixteenth century onwards, and this makes it almost impossible to draw a neat line between western and non-western concepts and terminologies.[33] What is ultimately important is not the origins of concepts and terminologies but their usefulness and appropriateness for the research question(s) we want to pursue comparatively.

Some famous large-scale comparisons have paid inadequate attention to conceptual problems. One example is Samuel P. Huntington's book about the alleged clash of civilizations, which predicts major conflicts between the West and the Islamic world.[34] Both units of comparison are set up in such a way that mutually incompatible cultural entities were confronted and the many differences within each ignored. Huntington's and other similar studies ignore postcolonialism's concern with 'hybridity', 'alterity' and the differences of experiences in different social context at their own peril. Arguably grand comparisons based on universal social theories work best where they first ask about processes of diffusion, communication and exchange that took place between different cultures. Only in a second step can specific research questions be formulated and specific conceptual and terminological frameworks be developed, which then guide the comparative practice.[35]

Comparative historians should be suspicious about theories and concepts, yet every comparison requires specific research questions in conjunction with larger theoretical and conceptual frameworks.[36] If we do not approach the material with specific questions in mind, we will face the problem of excess information (this problem is obviously more serious the larger the comparison) and will run the risk of merely narrating parallel stories rather than comparing. Furthermore, the method of investigation has to fit the questions that are being asked. For example, a statistical analysis of strikes in a particular industry across various nations does not yet tell us anything about the radicalism of workers employed in that industry. Only a qualitative assessment of motivations for strikes, the workings of different systems of industrial relations and the potential variations in the meanings of strike activity will permit assessment of degrees of radicalism of the workers in question.[37]

All qualitative analysis is based on texts and language; and language is a veritable minefield for comparative historians. There is often little correspondence between the meanings of historical terms in different languages. Words that seem similar may carry different meanings in different languages. The word functionary, for example, in English carries with it a whole host of negative connotations involving bureaucracy, pig-headedness and stupid application of the rule book. In German, the very similar *Funktionär* did not carry such negativity – at least before 1933. Even key concepts and terms are difficult to translate and carry different meanings. Jörn Leonhard, for example, has argued persuasively that the genesis of the word 'liberal' in Germany is quite different from that of the word 'liberal' in Britain. In Germany, it was a French conception of the word and its meanings, carrying positive connotations, that was imported. In Britain, the word was conveyed from Spanish and carried markedly negative connotations.[38] Similar difficulties of translation arise with terms such as 'middle class' and 'gentry'. The English university was different in many respects from the German *Universität* in the nineteenth century, which in turn was something altogether different from the French *Université*. Concepts and terms often do not travel well from one society to another; linguistic and conceptual worlds are often different, and clarity concerning these differences is a very important precondition for any comparison.

Another problem with language concerns the need to find common terminology for related phenomena. Terms such as working-class parties, socialist parties and labour parties all carry different meanings, even within a single historiographical tradition let alone multiple ones. One needs to tread carefully in choosing, and comparative historians are usually well advised to start by exploring the meanings of terms and concepts in different social contexts.[39]

9.4 Cultural transfer studies and comparison

Comparative history is a difficult and labour-intensive affair. Despite its potential pitfalls, a growing number of scholars have been convinced of its merits. More recently, French and German scholars have questioned the value of comparative history, and prefer the history of cultural transfer. Since these debates have not been prominent in English-speaking countries, I will introduce the history of cultural transfers. I will then examine its challenge to comparative history.

Michael Werner's and Michel Espagne's studies of Franco-German cultural transfers have been particularly influential in generating interest in cultural transfer studies.[40] They break up the picture of homogenous and internally stable national cultures by demonstrating that these cultures depend on a dialectical process through which indigenous and foreign elements are selectively appropriated. Cultural transfer historians call into question national modes of

argumentation, relativize national yardsticks and break up national explanatory frameworks. National identity appears as a process of cultural appropriation and mediation, and what is imagined as 'one's own' is bound up with what is conceived of, whether in negative or in positive terms, as 'the Other'. That 'Other' can often appear, at once and in equal measure, attractive and dangerous. As a rule, therefore, appropriation and rejection are two sides of the same coin. Research on cultural transfers thus contributes to exposing the absurdity of notions of the national character and of national cultures composed of national essences. In this way, the process of creation and evolution of plurally constituted national cultures is made visible. National memory comprises innumerable fragments of cultural assets, a goodly proportion of which are imported and adapted.

The reception of imports can take very different forms, ranging from total adoption through selective appropriation to conscious rejection. Cultural transfer research focuses on those groups most suited to the role of mediators – authors, publishers, journalists, cultural tourists, exiles, migrants, spies, translators, artists, musicians, diplomats, academics and teachers of foreign languages. These groups share the opportunity for contact with other national contexts and they settle, as it were, at the crossroads of two or more cultures. They are often able to develop or to exploit new and interconnected spheres of activity. But certain preconditions – such as linguistic competence, opportunities to travel or the availability of translations or of press reports – must be met for a cultural transfer to be rendered possible. Work on cultural transfers typically asks how newspapers and periodicals reported on the other country considered. Which books were imported or exported, and translated? What migratory movements were there? Which authorities, agencies and people knew something of the other country, and from what sources? What problems and misunderstandings arose in conveying terms and concepts from one language into the other? In what discursive and agential connections was the 'Other' used, and in pursuit of what interests? What preconditions had to be fulfilled for transfers to be completed successfully? How do selection, transportation and integration occur in different national contexts? Is an instance of integration effective over the long term, or is it temporary, its success contingent on particular circumstances?

Borders are of particular importance for research on transfers. On the one hand, a border can mean demarcation, putting off limits that which is defined as not belonging. On the other hand, however, borders can indicate preparedness for exchange and appropriation – a transmission belt of 'the other' on the way to its adoption as one's own. Border territories may variously be understood as sites of confrontation, intolerance and the collision of fundamentally incompatible 'national' values and normative horizons;[41] but they can also be terrains of an altogether different kind. Thus, delineations between 'national cultures' are blurred, for there is exchange between the mutually 'Other' and foreign.

Not every transfer is immediately recognizable as such. Once the foreign has been embedded in indigenous discursive and agential contexts, its foreign-ness tends to disappear. The archaeological capacities of the historian are required to bring the connections to light once more. The transmitters and the means of transmission must first be identified. Transmitters shared a transnational consciousness that permitted them to raise their sights above and beyond the merely national. This kind of international orientation was facilitated by personal contacts, lengthy stays abroad, and by opportunities for institutional cooperation. The cultural transfer approach, is for example, particularly promising for work on the history of scholarship, since scholarly communities evinced particularly pronounced processes of internationalization in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.[42] However, cultural transfer studies are also being employed fruitfully in a wide range of other areas, e.g. in the history of social reform.[43]

There has been considerable tension between comparative historians and historians of cultural transfer. The former have sometimes drawn strict demarcation lines, arguing that cultural transfer studies are different from comparisons, in that they do not look for similarities and differences between social contexts.[44] The latter have replied that comparativists single out artificial units of comparison, which are then contrasted without any consideration of the transfers taking place between them. Comparisons thus construct homogenous entities, contrast them with one another, and thereby re-enforce homogeneous identities. Cultural transfer, by contrast, is about hybridity, breaking up constructed entities and undermining homogeneous identities.[45]

Historians of cultural transfer have indeed identified a potential weakness of comparative history, and comparativists have been unnecessarily exclusionary in their treatment of cultural transfer studies. Comparisons should take account of those mutual dependencies and relations, but there is no necessary methodological reason why they should not do so.[46] In fact the analysis of transfers would sharpen understanding of similarities and differences. Indeed, it was one of the founding fathers of comparative history, Marc Bloch, who pointed out that transfers need to be considered in any comparison.[47]

9.5 The practice of comparative history

Finally, I would like to demonstrate how comparative history works in practice. I have chosen an article written by Eric Hobsbawm and Joan Scott on 'political shoemakers'.[48] Like every good comparison, it starts with a specific question: 'Why did nineteenth-century shoemakers have such a reputation for political radicalism and for being worker-intellectuals?' In many national historiographies we find the observation that shoemakers were radicals, but rarely do we find any explanation for this phenomenon. In fact it is almost taken for granted. It is only

by looking at shoemakers comparatively that, first of all, the universality of their radicalism comes into view. Hence only the comparative method allows the authors to identify the problem they subsequently seek to explain.

The spatial breadth of the argument is truly breathtaking. Although British, French and German shoemakers are arguably at the core of the authors' argument, there are references to at least a dozen other European countries and a range of non-European ones, including Australia, Argentina, Brazil, India and Japan. We are clearly not dealing with a totalizing comparison here. Rather, the article chooses to concentrate on a very specific theme or aspect, i.e. explaining the political radicalism of shoemakers. It comes very close to a universalizing comparison in that it is not concerned with specific national characteristics of shoemakers but looks for evidence from shoemakers around the world to explain what it identifies as a universal phenomenon, i.e. the political radicalization of shoemakers and their prominence among worker-intellectuals.

While the comparison aspires to geographical universality, its chronological framework is specific. Three time zones are evoked. First, a time before the Industrial Revolution – the golden age for the radical shoemaker; in this period they established their credentials as radical spokespersons for the people. Second, the article explores the fortunes of craft radicalism during the Industrial Revolution. Finally, it asks why the once-radical shoemakers were less prominent among the mass socialist movements of the more advanced capitalist age. Although the article includes references to dates for these distinct time periods, they are not too specific, and arguably they cannot be too specific, for the Industrial Revolution happened at different times for different social contexts. The article has to compare diachronically as well as synchronically, and this makes the specific dating of the three time zones impossible.

Hobsbawm and Scott's theoretical framework is not spelt out, but the reader soon encounters assumptions about the development of capitalism derived from a broadly Marxist understanding of history. Capitalism impacts on the organization of work, which in turn has repercussions for cultural expressions – in this case the artisanal culture of shoemakers. This materialist conception of history assumes that work forms the basis of people's social existence and out of it grows a particular culture. Hobsbawm and Scott carefully avoid the determinist implications of Marxist theory. They argue that shoemaker radicalism cannot be seen exclusively in terms of a response to early industrial capitalism, for it precedes the Industrial Revolution. Nevertheless, their basic theoretical framework remains historical materialism. Both authors, as theoretically aware Marxists, had also been influenced by Gramscian notions of the development of 'organic intellectuals' – intellectuals who emerge from the working class. Hobsbawm and Scott's shoemakers are the very epitome of organic intellectuals.

The authors' method of investigation is varied and always fits the questions that are being asked. We have much qualitative analysis of literature, poems, autobiography, social and political commentary, and dictionaries. Where appropriate, they resort to quantitative analysis – for example, to establish that cobblers often could not live by shoemaking and shoe-repairing alone, or to document the vast size of the shoemaking trade in the nineteenth century, or to demonstrate the numbers of shoemakers among socialist deputies in the German Reichstag.

Hobsbawm and Scott's comparison is noteworthy for its careful treatment of language and concepts. The key analytical concept of radicalism is not taken for granted, but carefully examined for its contextually varied meanings. The authors carefully demonstrate that words that signify the profession of shoemakers in different languages, such as 'cobbler', 'cordonnier' and 'Schuster', actually are comparable and mean the same thing. They point out that the proverb 'Shoemaker stick to your last' exists in a great variety of languages, and suggest that this indicates shoemakers' readiness to be involved in intellectual debates more usually perceived as the preserve of the educated classes.

Comparisons are about establishing similarities and differences, and this is clearly what this article does. It compares shoemakers' militancy with that of other artisanal groups. It discusses carpenters, tailors, construction workers, printers, metalworkers and many other craft groups, always delineating what they had in common with shoemakers and what made shoemakers distinctive. What was it about the shoemakers' trade that fostered their strong intellectual interests? The answers, mostly related to the world of work, are complex and varied, but they are laid out before the reader with wonderful clarity and a superb command of the literature on the worlds of artisans in very different social contexts. The intention of the comparison is analytical: the authors analyse the shoemakers' socialization, their values, institutions, work practices and mentalities. The article is an excellent example of how even the most wide-ranging comparison can avoid reductionism and improve our understanding of artisanal culture, which transcended diverse social contexts. If we are specialists on one particular social context, say a particular country such as Britain, we learn about artisans in other countries and through this we learn to rethink our knowledge of British artisans.

By raising the problem of universal artisan cultures, Hobsbawm and Scott make it possible for other authors to follow up their comparison with a more detailed typology of artisan radicalism. Sure enough, their article was the inspiration for a host of articles and monographs that examined artisanal cultures as defences of their independence and expression against an encroaching capitalist system.[49] The article is thus a pioneer and at the same time a model for subsequent comparisons of artisanal cultures from the pre-industrial to the industrial ages.

A masterpiece of comparative historical investigation, this article is also not blind to the importance of cultural transfers. It discusses the English conviction that French shoemakers were instrumental in the French Revolution of 1789. English shoemakers received and appropriated an image of the 'Other' in order to underline their own love of liberty. The authors specifically discuss the importance of travel for the socialization of shoemakers. During their journeymen days, shoemakers would visit different regions and countries, and familiarize themselves with diverse experiences in a variety of contexts. As transmitters of different social contexts they were able to transplant their own politicization (as journeymen) wherever they eventually settled. In the context of changes brought about by agricultural capitalism, shoemakers often voiced discontent among the rural population. They could do this only because they had the intellectual means to appropriate, adapt and mediate experiences from different contexts. Few comparative historians can aspire to the heights reached by Hobsbawm and Scott. Yet their article serves as a reminder of the power of comparative history and an enduring inspiration to future generations of comparative historians.

Guide to further reading

A.A. van den Braembussche, 'Historical Explanation and Comparative Method: Towards a Theory of the History of Society', *History and Theory* 28 (1989), pp. 2–24.

John Breuilly, 'Introduction: Making Comparisons in History', in Breuilly, *Labour and Liberalism in Nineteenth-Century Europe: Essays in Comparative History* (Manchester, 1992).

George Frederickson, 'From Exceptionalism to Variability: Recent Developments in Cross-National Comparative History', *The Journal of American History* 82 (1995), pp. 587–604.

Heinz-Gerhard Haupt, 'Comparative History', in Neil J. Smelser and Paul B. Baltes (eds), *International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioural Sciences* (Amsterdam, 2001), pp. 2397–403.

Jürgen Kocka, 'Asymmetrical Historical Comparison: The Case of the German "Sonderweg"', *History and Theory* 38 (1999), pp. 40–50.

Chris Lorenz, 'Comparative Historiography: Problems and Perspectives', *History and Theory* 38 (1999), pp. 25–39.

Charles Ragin, *The Comparative Method: Moving Beyond Quantitative and Qualitative Strategies* (Berkeley, 1987).

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W.H. Sewell, 'Marc Bloch and the Logic of Comparative History', *History and Theory* 6 (1967), pp. 208–18.

Theda Skocpol and Margaret Somers, 'The Uses of Comparative History', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 22 (1978), pp. 174–97.

Notes

1 John Stuart Mill, *Philosophy of Scientific Method* (New York, 1950), pp. 211–33.

2 See Hartmut Kaelble, 'Vergleichende Sozialgeschichte im 19. und 20. Jahrundert. Forschungen europäischer Historiker', *Jahrbuch für Wirtschaftsgeschichte* Part 1 (1993), pp. 173–200, for an attempt to provide a survey of the rise of comparative history in Europe from around 1980.

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5 Neil Evans, 'Debate: British History: Past, Present – and Future?', *Past and Present* 119 (1988), pp. 194–203.

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10 On the theory and practice of comparative transcultural history, see Jürgen Osterhammel, *Geschichtswissenschaft jenseits des Nationalstaats. Studien zu Beziehungsgeschichte und Zivilisationsvergleich* (Göttingen, 2001).
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