MARC BLOCH

A Contribution Towards a Comparative History of European Societies

SOURCE

Marc Bloch, "Pour une histoire comparée des sociétés européennes," *Revue de synthèse historique* 46 (1928): 15–50. ENGLISH TRANSLATION: "A Contribution Towards a Comparative History of European Societies," in Marc Bloch, *Land and Work in Mediaeval Europe*, translated by J. E. Anderson (London: Routledge, 1967), 44–81.

Marc Léopold Benjamin Bloch (1886–1944) was a French historian of Alsatian Jewish background, who, together with Lucien Febvre, co-founded the journal *Annales d'histoire économique et sociale: revue trimestrielle* in 1929. The journal served as the nucleus of the leading Annales School of French social history. Bloch studied at the École Normale Supérieure in Paris, and also in Berlin and Leipzig (1908–1909). In 1919, he became a lecturer in medieval history at Strasbourg University, and in 1936, he became a professor in economic history at the Sorbonne, Paris. During World War II, he was captured by the Gestapo and executed for his participation in the French Resistance.

In this pioneering essay, Bloch provides a comprehensive evaluation of the advantages and limitations of the comparative method for historical research. In his view, comparisons allow historians to identify new, innovative research questions, to test research hypotheses, and to identify both the common and the original features of their particular object of study. Bloch recommended that historians compare, first and foremost, contemporary and neighboring societies, which are able to influence each other. In so doing, Bloch implicitly emphasized the advantages of combining the comparative method with the history of transfers. He also highlighted the paramount importance of the comparative method for providing a new integrative view on European history. His methodological insights have opened up new avenues of research for the exploration of European history, influencing successive generations of historians in France and abroad.

MAIN WORKS · *Les rois thaumaturges: Étude sur le caractère surnaturel attribué à la puissance royale particulièrement en France et en Angleterre* (Paris: Istra, 1924); in English: *The Royal Touch: Sacred Monarchy and Scrofula in England and France*, trans. J. E. Anderson (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973); *Pour une histoire comparée des sociétés européennes* (Paris: Renaissance du livre, 1928); *Les caractères originaux de l'histoire rurale française* (Oslo: H. Aschehoug, 1931). English ed.: *French Rural History: An Essay on its Basic Characteristics*, trans. Janet Sondheimer (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966); *Apologie pour l'histoire; ou, Métier d'historien* (Paris: A. Colin, 1949). English ed.: *The Historian's Craft* (New York: Knopf, 1953); *Memoirs of War: 1914–1915* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980).

SECONDARY LITERATURE · William Sewell, "Marc Bloch and the Logic of Comparative History," *History and Theory* 6 (1967): 208–18; Alette Olin Hill and Boyd H. Hill, Jr, "Marc Bloch and Comparative History," *The American Historical Review* 85, no. 4 (October, 1980): 828–46; Daniel Chirot, "The Social and Historical Landscape of Marc Bloch," in *Vision and Method in Historical Sociology*, ed. Theda Skocpol (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 22–46; Bryce Lyon, "Marc Bloch: Historian," *French Historical Studies* 15, no. 2 (1987): 195–207; Carole Fink, *Marc Bloch: A Life in History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); Peter Burke, *The French Historical Revolution: The Annales School 1929–1989* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990), 13–35; Hartmut Atsma and André Burguière, eds., *Marc Bloch aujourd'hui: Histoire comparée* (Paris: Editions de l'EHESS, 1990); S. R. Epstein, "Marc Bloch: The Identity of a Historian," *Journal of Medieval History* 19 (1993): 273–83; Susan W. Friedman, *Marc Bloch, Sociology and Geography: Encountering Changing Disciplines* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Katherine Stirling, "Rereading Marc Bloch: The Life and Works of a Visionary Modernist," *History Compass* 5, no. 2 (2007): 525–38.

I

I should like first of all to forestall a possible misunderstanding and spare myself unnecessary ridicule. I am not a "discoverer" of a new panacea. The comparative method has great possibilities; I consider that an improved and more general use of this method in historical study is one of the most urgent tasks for the present day. But the method has its limitations, for there is no such thing as a talisman of knowledge. But it is already a well-tried method, which has long since proved its value. There have already been many voices to recommend its application to the history of political, economic and legal institutions.[1] Nevertheless it is obvious that the majority of historians are not

1 Without making any pretension to drawing up a general bibliography, which would be out of place here, I would just mention the address given by Henri Pirenne to the Fifth International Congress of Historical Sciences (*Report*, 17–32), which is all the more significant because it embodies the thoughts of a historian whose fame rests upon a national work; see also Louis Davillé, "La comparaison et la mé-

yet fundamentally converted to it. They make polite gestures of assent, then go back to their work without effecting the slightest change in their habits. Why is this? It is no doubt because they have been too easily persuaded that "comparative history" is a chapter of the philosophy of history or of general sociology, and these are disciplines which the historian—according to his cast of mind—either reveres or greets with a skeptical smile, but in general takes good care not to practise; for what he requires of a method is that it should be a tool, in ordinary use, easy to manipulate, and yielding positive results. Now that is exactly what the comparative method is—but I doubt whether up till now it has been sufficiently shown to be such. It can and it should enter the world of detailed research. Its future—perhaps even the future of our discipline—depends on it doing so. At this point I should like to define the nature and the possible applications of this excellent tool, to show by means of some examples the chief services that it may be expected to render, and finally to suggest some practical methods of making it easier to use.

Addressing a group of mediaevalists, I shall take my examples preferably from the period usually called—whether rightly or wrongly—the Middle Ages. But it goes without saying that—*mutatis mutandis*—the observations I am about to make would apply equally well to the European societies that we call modern. And I shall also allow myself sometimes to refer to the latter.

II

The term "comparative history," common enough today, has undergone the fate of almost all common words: it has changed its meaning. Even if we leave aside all obviously wrong usages, an ambiguity still remains. People studying the humanities are constantly grouping together under the expres-

thode comparative, en particulier dans les études historiques, I et II," *Revue de synthèse historique* 27 (December 1913): 217–57, conceived in a different spirit from the present work, and an article by Henri Sée, "Remarques sur l'application de la méthode comparative à l'Histoire économique et sociale," *Revue de synthèse historique* 36 (December 1923): 37–46; reprinted in his *Science et philosophie de l'histoire* (Paris, 1928); also Henri Berr, "Le Ve Congrès international des sciences historiques (Bruxelles, 8–15 avril) et la Synthèse en Histoire," *Revue de Synthèse historique* 35 (1923): 5–14, here 11. As positive contributions to comparative history let us recall, in the field of political history, the remarkable article by C. Langlois, "The Comparative History of England and France during the Middle Ages," *The English Historical Review* 5 (1890): 259–63; and on a rather different topic some very revealing pages in H. Pirenne, *Les Villes du Moyen Age: Essai d'histoire économique et sociale.* (Brussels, 1927).

sion "the comparative method" two widely different intellectual processes. The linguists seem to have been the only ones to have concerned themselves with making a careful distinction between them.[2] Let us attempt an accurate definition from the historian's own point of view.

First, what do we mean in our field of study by comparison? No doubt about it, we mean this: to choose from one or several social situations, two or more phenomena which appear at first sight to offer certain analogies between them; then to trace their line of evolution, to note the likenesses and the differences, and as far as possible explain them. Thus, two conditions are necessary to make a comparison, historically speaking, possible: there must be a certain similarity between the facts observed—an obvious point—and a certain dissimilarity between the situations in which they have arisen. For example, if I am studying the manorial system in the Limousin, I shall be continually impelled to consider setting side by side information drawn from other manors; in common or garden language, I shall be comparing them. But I shall not consider myself to be engaged in what is technically called "comparative" history, for I shall be taking the different objects studied from a cross-section of a single society in which, looked at as a whole, there is a considerable degree of unity. In practice, it has become customary to reserve the term "comparative history" almost entirely for the comparative examination of phenomena that have taken place on different sides of a State, or national, frontier. Political or national contrasts are, indeed, always the ones that strike the mind most immediately. But, as we shall see, this is really a gross simplification. Let us confine ourselves to the idea of differences in environment—an idea that is both more flexible and more accurate.

Thus understood, the process of comparison is common to all aspects of the method. But it is capable of two completely different uses—different in principle and in result according to the field of study envisaged.

Let us now consider the first case. The historian selects some societies so widely separated in time and space that any analogies observed between them with respect to such and such phenomena can obviously not be explained either by mutual influence or by a common origin. The commonest type of example, since the distant days when Father Lafitau S. J. invited

2 See especially A. Meillet, *La méthode comparative en linguistique historique* (Oslo, 1925), to which I owe the general idea of development in the two kinds of approach.

his readers to compare "the customs of the American savages" with those of "primitive times,"[3] consists of an examination of Mediterranean civilisations—Hellenic or Roman—alongside contemporary "primitive" societies. In the early days of the Roman Empire, only a short distance from Rome and on the delightful shores of Lake Nemi, a rite was enacted which stands out by reason of its strange cruelty in the midst of the customs of a relatively well-policed society. Whoever aspired to become the priest of the little temple of Diana could do so under one condition only—he must kill the officiant whose place he coveted. "If we can show that a barbarous custom like that of the priesthood of Nemi has existed elsewhere; if we can detect the motives which led to its institution; and if we can prove that these motives have operated widely, universally, in human society, producing in varied circumstances a variety of institutions specifically different but generically alike; if we can show, lastly, that these very motives were at work in classical antiquity; then we may fairly infer that at a remoter age the same motives gave birth to the priesthood of Nemi."[4] This was the starting-point for the immense enquiry undertaken by Frazer in *The Golden Bough*, a pre-eminent example of a well-illustrated and instructive piece of research entirely based on the collection of facts from the four corners of the world. The comparative method as thus interpreted has rendered immense services of every kind, more particularly to the ancient history of the Mediterranean region. A humanist education had accustomed us to picture Rome and Greece as too like ourselves; but the comparative method in the hands of ethnographers has restored to us with a kind of mental shock this sense of the difference, the exotic element, which is the indispensable condition for a balanced understanding of the past. The other benefits have been rather more general ones, such as the possibility of filling in certain gaps in documentation by means of hypotheses based upon analogy; the opening up of new avenues of research suggested by the comparative method; above all, the explanation of a great many survivals that have up to now been incomprehensible. I am thinking here of customs which have survived and become crystallised after the original psychological

3 P. Lafitau, *Moeurs des sauvages américains comparées aux moeurs des premiers temps* (Paris, 1724); on the work itself see Gilbert Chinard, *L'Amérique et le rêve exotique dans le littérature française au XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles* (Paris, 1913), 315.

4 J. Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, 3rd ed., vol. 1: 10. The example chosen by Meillet is different, drawn from researches on animal stories.

environment that gave them birth has disappeared, customs which would seem inexplicably strange if the examination of other similar cases in other civilizations did not make it possible to reconstruct precisely this vanished situation, as in the ritual murder at Lake Nemi.[5] In short, this long-range comparative method is essentially a matter of interpolating a graph. It postulates, and always reverts in conclusion to the fundamental unity of the human mind, or, alternatively, the monotony and astonishing poverty of the intellectual resources at man's disposal throughout the course of history. This was particularly true of primitive times, when, as Sir James Frazer puts it, "the human race in all its early crudity was building up its philosophy of life."

But there is another use for the comparative method. This is to make a parallel study of societies that are at once neighbouring and contemporary, exercising a constant mutual influence, exposed throughout their development to the action of the same broad causes just because they are close and contemporaneous, and owing their existence in part at least to a common origin. In history proper, this is the equivalent of the historical study of languages (for example, Indo-European languages); whereas comparative history in the broad sense would more or less correspond to linguistics in general. In both history and language, it appears true that of these two comparative methods the one with the more limited horizon is also the richer in results. Because it is more capable of rigorous classification, and more critical about the objects it compares, it may hope to reach conclusions of fact that are less hypothetical and much more precise?[6] This at any rate is

5 But naturally the mere fact of "survival" is not enough; other things have to be taken into account. An interesting fact, which must be explained, is why the rite or institution survived despite its apparent failure to fit into its new environment.

6 The study of primitive civilizations is today turning quite clearly towards a more exact classification of the societies to be compared. There is no reason at all why the second type of method I am trying to classify here should not apply to these societies just as much as to others. Moreover, it is obvious that certain of the advantages of a comparative history with limited horizons, as outlined below—where I discuss suggestions for research, and caution in attributing everything to pseudo or local causes—are equally applicable to the other method. The two aspects of the method have certain features in common; but this does not mean that they do not need to be carefully distinguished. The study of sacred kingship in Europe provides a very clear example both of the immense value and of the limitations of comparative ethnography. Though it alone is able to put us on the right road to the correct psychological explanation of the phenomenon, it has been shown by experience to be altogether unfitted for the task of drawing out its real meaning. That at any rate is what I attempted to show in *Les rois thaumaturges: Étude sur le caractère surnaturel attribué à la puissance royale particulièrement en France et en Angleterre* (Strasbourg, 1924), 53, 59.

what I hope to be able to show; for it is certainly this method that I intend to elaborate. I propose to compare the various European societies—especially in Eastern and Central Europe—societies that are contemporary, that live close to one another, and that go back if not to one common origin, at any rate to several.

III

But before phenomena can be interpreted, they must be discovered. And this preliminary step will reveal in the first place the usefulness of the comparative method. But—it may be asked—is it really necessary to go to such trouble to "discover" historical facts? They are and can only be known through documents: in order to bring them to light, isn't it enough to read texts and monuments? Yes, but one must know how to read them. A document is a witness; and like most witnesses, it does not say much except under cross-examination. The real difficulty lies in putting the right questions. That is where comparisons can be of such valuable help to the historian, who is always in the position of the magistrate hearing the case.

This is what frequently happens. In a given society, a phenomenon has occurred over such a wide field and has had so many and such obvious consequences that the historian—short of being blind—can hardly fail to be struck by it. This is particularly so in the political sphere, where extended effects are ordinarily the easiest to detect in our source-material. Let us now consider a neighbouring society. It may well be that analogous events have arisen in it, and that the effects have been just about the same in extent and power. But either because of inadequate documents, or because the political and social structure of that society is different, the result of these events is less immediately perceptible. Not that they have been any less serious: but their effect has been produced in depth, like those obscure bodily diseases which do not immediately reveal a series of well-defined symptoms, and therefore go on undiscovered for years. When at last they do show up, they are still almost impossible to recognise because the observer cannot connect the superficial effects with an original cause that arose such a long time ago. Is that simply a theoretical hypothesis? To show that it is nothing of the kind, I am led to take an example from my own researches. I am sorry to

have to take the stage in person; but research-workers do not normally take the trouble to record their tentative efforts, and literature does not supply any case which I could substitute for my own personal experience.[7]

If in the agrarian history of Europe there is one really striking transformation, it is the one that took place in the greater part of England, from about the beginning of the 15th century up to the early years of the 19th—namely the great enclosure movement, which in its twofold form (enclosure of the commons, and enclosure of the arable) may be defined basically as a movement leading to the disappearance of communal obligations and the growth of individualism in agriculture. Let us here consider only the enclosures of arable. We start out with a system by which the arable land, as soon as the harvest was finished, was turned over to common grazing. Then it would be sown again and bear another harvest, repeating the rhythm of cultivation and obeying the rules laid down in the interests of the community. We find, at the end of the transformation, all land held strictly in severalty. Everything about this great metamorphosis catches and holds our attention: the polemics to which it gave rise in the course of its history; the relative ease of access to most of the documents (Acts of Parliament and official enquiries) bearing upon them; its links with political history, in which the growing influence of Parliament, where the great landowners were predominant, had the counter-effect of entrenching the gentry more firmly in power; its possible relationships with the two most immediately obvious facts of English Economic History—I mean colonial expansion and the industrial revolution, for both of which it probably prepared the way. (This has been doubted, but for our purpose it is enough that it should be a matter of discussion); and finally the way in which it not only extended its influence into the field of social development, always a difficult subject to uncover, but also affected the most obvious features of the landscape, causing hedges to spring up throughout the English countryside where it was formerly open as far as the eye could see. And so no history of England, however elementary, will fail to include some account of the enclosures.

7 In what follows—and later on in dealing with the theories of Meitzen—I am anticipating the results of a work on agrarian systems in which I have been for long engaged, whose conclusions were presented to another section of the congress; see my *Les Caractères originaux de l'histoire rurale française* (Paris, 1951), 262.

But on turning to a history of France—even, alas, an economic history—we shall not find the slightest allusion to movements of this kind. And yet there certainly have been such movements. We are beginning nowadays, thanks particularly to the labours of Henri Sée, to be aware of their existence, though we are very far from being able to appreciate their extent, and further still from any clear perception of the points of similarity and of divergence between these developments in French and in English society. But let us leave on one side this last topic, for when the comparative method is properly used, our first task is not to discuss the significance of contrasts but to discover the facts. It is most remarkable that up to the present the disappearance of communal obligations in France has hardly been noted except at periods and in places where—as in England the phenomenon was recorded in official documents, and where it was thus readily noticeable—namely in the "enclosure awards" of the 18th century and the preceding or subsequent official enquiries. The same transformation, however, took place in another part of France, where it has not so far—to the best of my knowledge—been noticed, namely in Provence: and it began in a relatively remote period, the 15th, 16th and 17th centuries. In Provence, it was most probably a much more profound and thorough-going change than in most of the more northerly regions where the same facts have been studied again and again; but it had the misfortune to occur at a time when economic life—especially rural life—was hardly of any interest to writers or administrators. Moreover, the change did not bring about any visible modification of the countryside, since the disappearance of communal obligations did not entail the construction of hedges, and it was therefore easy for it to pass unnoticed.

Were the repercussions in Provence the same as those in England? For the moment, I must confess ignorance on this point. Moreover, I am very far from believing that all the characteristics of the English movement were reproduced on the shores of the Mediterranean. On the contrary, I am struck by the fact that conditions in the south were peculiar owing to the very different system of land tenure when compared with the north. (It did not, as in England, give rise to a redistribution of the "strips," to "consolidation." Special customs such as transhumance account for social conditions that are without parallel in the English countryside. I am thinking particularly of the antagonism between the big graziers, the large-scale breeders of stock and the other classes of the population.)

It is none the less extremely interesting to note in a Mediterranean country a phenomenon, with its own special characteristics, which might have seemed, up till now, to be found mainly in higher latitudes. Moreover, it is not very difficult to see the process at work in Provence; a closer examination reveals the existence of a fair number of documents enabling its course to be followed, such as county orders, communal discussions, and lawsuits whose lengthy and roundabout proceedings bear eloquent testimony to the seriousness of the interests at stake. But there is a real need to search out these documents and compare them with each other. If I have been able to do this, it is certainly not because I am particularly familiar with these local documents, far from it—I know them, and always shall; much less well than the scholars whose ordinary field of study has been the history of Provence. They are the only people who can really work the vein: all I can do here is to point out its existence. I have only one advantage over them, a quite impersonal one; I happen to have read works on English enclosures or on similar rural revolutions in other European countries, and I have tried to draw some inspiration from them. In short, I have used that most effective of all magician's wands—the comparative method.

IV

Now let us pass on to interpretation.

The most obvious service we can hope for from a careful comparison between facts drawn from different and neighbouring societies is to enable us to discern the mutual influences exercised by these groups. Careful enquiry would no doubt reveal among mediaeval societies the direction of some borrowings which have so far been insufficiently investigated. Here is one example, which I put forward simply as a working hypothesis.

The Carolingian monarchy, when compared with that of the Merovingians which immediately preceded it, shows some completely original characteristics. The Merovingians in their relations with the Church had never been anything but simple laymen. But Pepin and his descendants were anointed with holy oil at their coronation and so marked with its sacred character. The Merovingians, sharing the beliefs of their contemporaries, had in turn dominated, enriched, and exploited the Church; they had never

been much concerned with backing its precepts with the force at the disposal of the State. But the Carolingians behaved quite differently. Although they did not in their times of power fail to domineer over the clergy and use their property for the benefit of their own policies, they nevertheless clearly considered themselves in duty bound to establish the law of God. Their legislation was essentially religious and tinged with morality. When I read in a newspaper some time ago a decree promulgated by the Wahabite emir of the Nejd, I was struck by its points of resemblance to the pietist literature of the Capitularies. There is not much difference between the great courts assembled round the king or the emperor and the assembly of the Councils. And lastly, the protective relationships under the Merovingians, already such a prominent force in society, had only occupied a marginal position in the law, which traditionally took no cognisance of them. The Carolingians, on the other hand, recognised these links and gave them sanction. They defined and set limits to the cases in which commended man might be allowed to leave his lord. They tried to use these personal relationships to consolidate the public peace, which was at once the most cherished and the most fleeting object of their dogged ambition. "Let each overlord exercise a coercive action upon those who are set under him, so that they may become more and more obedient and submissive to the imperial mandates and precepts."[8] This phrase from a Capitulary of 810 is an expressive short summary of the imperial social policy. No doubt a thorough search in the Gaul of the Merovingians would reveal the germs of any one of these features. It is none the less true that, when one considers Gaul only, the Carolingian state seems to have come into being *ex nihilo*. But let us look beyond the Pyrenees. In barbarian Europe from the 7th century onwards kings could be observed receiving "most holy unction,"[9] as one of them, Ervig, calls it. This was among the Visigoth kings; a monarchy that was entirely religious, preoccupied with ensuring by State action that the orders of the Church were carried out. Or consider Spain, where Councils were almost indistinguishable from political assemblies; or the laws of the Visigoth sovereigns,

8 *Capitularia regum Francorum*, *Monumenta Germaniae historica*. Legum sectio II; T. 1–2, ed. A. Boretius (Hannover, 1883–1897), no. 64, cl. 17: "Ut unusquisque suos iuniores distringat ut melius ac melius oboediant et consentiant mandatis et praeceptis imperialibus."

9 The twelfth Council of Toledo (681), in a letter from King Ervig; see G. D. Mansi, *Sacrorum Conciliorum Nova Amplissima Collectio*, vol. 11, col. 1025.

which had been replaced very early on, in order to assure some measure of control, by the ties of feudal lord and vassal[10] upon which personalities the military organisation tended to be founded.[11] Naturally, it is not difficult to discover, along with these analogies, a number of differences. The chief one is that the first Carolingians governed the Church, instead of being governed by the Church like the Gothic princes of the 7th century. The likenesses remain however extremely striking. Is it only a matter of seeing them simply as the product of similar causes, acting on both sides in the same direction—causes which one would then have to define? Or—remembering that the facts about the Visigoths are of course earlier than those about the Franks—are we to believe that a certain conception of royalty and its proper role, certain ideas concerning the constitution of a feudal society, and of its use by the State, appearing first in Spain and having become embodied in its legislative documents, were later consciously taken up by the entourage of the Frankish kings and the kings themselves? To win the right to answer this question, a detailed enquiry would clearly be required, which I could not enter upon here. Its principal object would be to discover by what channels the influence of the Visigoths was able to penetrate into Gaul. There are some universally recognised facts which seem to be of the kind that would make this hypothesis fairly probable. It is indisputable that there was during the century following the Arabic conquest a Spanish *diaspora* in the Frankish kingdom. The fugitives *de partibus Hispaniae*, whom Charlemagne and Louis the Pious settled in Septimania (i.e. southern Gaul), were to a large extent people of humble station; but they also included some from the upper classes (*majores et potentiores*) and some priests, that is to say, people who were familiar with the political and religious customs of the country they had been forced to leave.[12] Some of the Spaniards who took refuge in

10 In the collection of documents of Sanchez-Albornoz, "Las Behetrias," in *Anuario de historia del derecho español*, vol. 1 (1924), notes on 183, 184, 185; M. Sanchez-Albornoz's study gives the most reliable and complete explanation of the Visigoth *patrocinium*. Particularly to be noted is the passage in the *Codex Euricianus*, CCX, which originally applied to the *buccellarius* (private soldier), and reappears in the *Lex Recessvindiana*, V, 3, 1, with the word *buccellarius* substituted for a rather looser term: *et quem in patrocinio habuerit*.

11 The laws of Ervig (680–687), in the collection *Lex Visig.*, 9, 2, 9, ed. Zeumer, 378. See Sanchez-Albornoz, "Las Behetrias," 194.

12 *Maiores et potentiores*: *Capitularia regum Francorum*, vol. 1, no. 133 (263, 1.26); Prêtres: *Diplomata Karolin.*, vol. 1, no. 217; *Histoire générale de Languedoc,* vol. 2, col. 228; see also E. Cauvet, *Étude historique sur l'établissement des Espagnols dans la Septimanie* (Montpellier, 1898); Imbart de la Tour, "Les

Gaul had brilliant careers in the Church: such men as Claude of Turin and Agobard of Lyons, who preached on the unified legislation which he had seen in his native country; and especially Theodulfe of Orleans, who was the first to arrive and without doubt the most influential of them all. Finally, there was the Spanish collection of conciliar documents, which exerted an undeniable effect on Carolingian canon law, though its extent has not so far been accurately estimated. Let us again stress the point that I am not claiming to reach any decisions. But I hope you will admit that this is a problem deserving attention. And it is not the only one of its kind.[13]

V

"Historical resemblances," said Renan with regard to Jesus and the Essenes, "do not always imply connections." This is certainly true. Many similarities, when closely examined, prove not to be explicable in terms of imitation. I would freely admit that these are the most interesting ones to observe, for they allow us to take a real step forward in the exciting search for causes. This is where the comparative method seems capable of rendering the most conspicuous service to historians by setting them on the road that may lead to the discovery of real causes. Moreover—and perhaps most important of all—it can benefit them in a more modest but very necessary way by preventing them from following certain paths that are merely blind alleys.

Everyone knows what is meant by the Estates General or Provincial in 14th and 15th century France. (I use these epithets in their ordinary and approximate sense as a matter of convenience, without of course failing to be aware that the Estates General and Provincial were somewhat indeterminate bodies, that a truly "general" Estates was practically never summoned, and finally that provincial representation was by no means fixed over a consider-

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colonies agricoles et l'occupation des terres désertes à l'epoque carolingienne," in *Questions d'histoire sociale et religieuse* (Paris, 1907).

13 Sustained as it was by borrowings from elsewhere, the Carolingian monarchy in its turn was copied by others. Its influence on the Anglo-Saxon monarchies does not seem to have been sufficiently studied. Helen Cam's useful essay, *Local Government in Francia and England: A Comparison of the Local Administration and Jurisdiction of the Carolingian Empire with that of the West Saxon Kingdom* (London, 1912), is far from exhausting the subject.

able period.) In the course of the last few years[14] a number of monographs have been written on the Estates Provincial, especially those of the great feudal principalities. They represent an effort on the part of scholars that is all the more praiseworthy, seeing that almost everywhere, especially for the earlier period, the documents are appallingly scanty and barren of information. These monographs have cleared up a number of important points in a most interesting manner. But from the very start almost all their authors have come up against a difficulty they had no means of overcoming, the nature of which they sometimes did not even recognise—I mean the problem of "origins." I am quite ready to use this expression as ordinarily employed by historians; but though current, it is ambiguous. It tends to confuse two intellectual operations that are different in essence and unequal in scope. On the one hand there is research into the oldest institutions (ducal or hundred courts, for example), out of which the Estates seem simply to have developed. This is a perfectly legitimate and necessary enquiry. But there remains the second procedure—namely research into the reasons that could explain why, at a given moment, these traditional institutions took on a new lease of life and a new significance, why they became transformed into Estates; that is into assemblies endowed with political and financial duties, who were conscious of possessing, over against the sovereign and his council, a certain power, subordinate perhaps, yet none the less distinct, which was the ultimate expression, through infinitely variable means, of the different social forces in the country. To bring the seed to light is not the same thing as to show the causes for its germination. Might we then hope to discover these causes if for instance we live in Artois (so far as the estates of Artois are concerned) or in Brittany (if it is a question of the Breton Estates), or even if we are content to take a general look at the kingdom of France? Certainly not. This procedure would simply land us in a maze of little local facts, to which we should be inclined to attribute a value that they certainly never possessed; and we should inevitably miss the essential point. For a general phenomenon can only be produced by equally general causes; and if there is such a thing as a phenomenon occurring throughout Europe, this—which I have called by its French name, the formation of the Estates—is undoubtedly a case in point.

14 See H. Prentout, "Les États provinciaux en France," in *Bulletin of the International Committee of Historical Sciences*, July 1928 (*Scientific Reports Presented to the Sixth International Congress of Historical Sciences*).

At varying moments—all, however, very close to one another in time—*Estates* may be observed springing up throughout France; but in Germany too, in the territorial principalities, there were the *Stände* (the two words are curiously alike in meaning), in Spain the *Cortes*, in Italy the *Parliamenti*. Even in the English Parliament, which was born in a vastly different political environment, development was often subject to a trend of ideas and a series of needs analogous to those which led to the formation of what the Germans call the *Ständestaat*. Please do not misunderstand me. I fully recognise the immense value of local monographs, and I do not in the least suggest that their authors should step outside the framework of their proper studies and follow one another in a search for the solution to this large-scale European problem that I have just referred to. On the contrary, we beg them to realise that they could not, each one working on his own, find a solution to it. The chief service they can do us is to uncover the different political and social phenomena in their respective provinces which preceded or accompanied the appearance of the Estates or the *Stände*, and which would therefore seem to have some provisional claim to be numbered among its possible causes. In this enquiry, they would do well to pay some attention to the results obtained in other regions—to engage in fact in a little comparative history. The overall comparison would have to come later. Without preliminary local research it would be useless; but it alone will be able to select from the tangle of conceivable causes those which exercised a general effect—the only real ones.

It would not, I feel sure, be difficult to give further examples. To select one among many, I should say without a doubt that when the German historians studied the formation of the imperial "territories" (the little States that were formed in the course of the 12th and 13th centuries in the interior of the Empire and gradually acquired, to their own advantage, the lions' share of public power), they too often allowed themselves to slip into a habit of looking upon this phenomenon as specifically Germanic. But how can it really be separated from the consolidation of the feudal principalities in France? Here is another illustration of the circumspection which the comparative method ought to engender in historians who are too inclined to see the causes of local social transformations as exclusively local: the development of the manor in the closing centuries of the Middle Ages and at the beginning of modern times. The lords of the manor, when their revenue

was threatened by the fall in the value of their money rents, became for the first time sharply aware of the impoverishment which had for a long while been eating piecemeal into their fortunes.[15] In every country they were concerned to ward off this danger. With this end in view they used various means in various places, which proved more or less effective. They increased certain casual profits where the amount was not rigorously fixed by custom (the English "fines"); they substituted, wherever the law allowed it, a rent in kind for a money rent, proportional to the harvest (hence the great extension of the *métayage*[16] system in France); they brutally dispossessed their tenants, incidentally using methods that differed greatly according to the locality (England, Eastern Germany). This was in principle a general effort; but there were extreme variations in the methods used, and their success. Here then comparison invites us to note extremely marked divergences as between one national setting and another—which we shall see below to be one of its chief points of interest. But it forces us at the same time to see in the original impulse that gave birth to such a variety of results a European phenomenon, for which only European causes could be responsible. To try to explain the formation of the *Gutsherrschaft* in Mecklenburg or Pomerania, or the accumulation of land by the English squire, solely with the help of facts gathered from Mecklenburg, Pomerania and England, and not found elsewhere, would be to waste one's time in a rather futile intellectual pursuit.[17]

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15 Alain Chartier, in his *Quadriloge invectif*, composed in 1422, puts into the mouth of the knight the following words: "the common people have this advantage, that their purse is like a cistern that has collected and continues to collect all the waters and showers provided by all the wealth of this kingdom . . . *for the fall in the value of money has lessened the amount that they have to pay us in dues and rents*, and the monstrous rise in the price of food and of labour for which they are responsible has enabled them to collect and build up their substance by reason of what they collect and amass day by day." In *Les Classiques français du Moyen Age*, ed. E. Droz (Paris, 1923), 30. I do not think I have come across an older passage where this observation is as clearly stated. But it would be well worth while pursuing this line of research. For—though this is too often forgotten—the important point here is not so much the moment when the phenomenon began to exist (one would have to go a long way back to find the starting-point), but rather the moment when it began to be noticed. As long as the *seigneurs* did not realise that their dues were diminishing, they obviously would not seek for the means of repairing their loss. We have good reason to know at the present time that the depreciation of a currency while the nominal value remains the same can easily remain unnoticed for quite a long time by the people affected. Once again, we see that an economic problem turns out to be a psychological problem.

16 *Métayage*, the system of leasing land in return for a rent in kind.

17 The necessity for comparative studies, which are alone capable of dispelling the mirage of mistaken local causes, has been well demonstrated in a book, remarkable in spite of some deficiencies; A. Brun,

VI

But let us beware of a misunderstanding from which the comparative method has only too frequently suffered. Too often people have believed or affected to believe that its only aim is to search for similarities. They are only too ready to accuse it of being satisfied with forced analogies, and even of inventing them on occasion by arbitrarily postulating some necessary parallelism between the various developments. There is no point in examining whether these reproaches have sometimes seemed justified, for it is only too certain that the method, if practised thus, would be no more than a sorry caricature. On the contrary, the comparative method, rightly conceived, should involve especially lively interest in the perception of differences, whether original or resulting from divergent developments from the same starting-point. Not long ago, at the beginning of a work intended to "mark the specific elements in the development of the Germanic languages as compared with the other Indo-Germanic languages," Meillet put forward as one of the essential tasks for comparative linguistics a sustained attempt to "show the originality of the different languages."[18] In the same way comparative history has a duty to bring out the "originality" of the different societies. Is it superfluous to remark that there is hardly any more delicate operation than this, or any that more imperatively calls for methodical com-

Recherches historiques sur l'introduction du français dans les provinces du Midi (Paris, 1923); see L. Febvre, "Politique royale ou Civilisation française? Remarques sur un problème d'Histoire linguistique," *Revue de synthése historique* 38 (December 1924): 37–53, here 37ff; Brun, as is well known, has proved that French did not begin to win its way in the south of France before the middle of the 15th century. Here in his own words are the reasons why, having first decided to restrict himself to a summary examination or the relevant documents, he then decided to extend his researches over the whole or southern France, instead of exploring one region only with extreme thoroughness, as so many scholars would no doubt have advised him to do. "It would perhaps have been preferable to restrict the problem to a single province and to exhaust the mass or documents available there. Yes—from the point of view of strict method this would have been the preferable course; but in fact this could have led to serious errors of interpretation. For example, having chosen Provence, and noting that French was in this region an innovation of the 16th century, one would have jumped to the conclusion that it had followed upon the reunion of 1481–1486—which is approximately correct. But would one have noticed that the deeper cause of this event was not the reunion itself, but the special circumstances in which it took place in the 15th century, at a turning-point in our history, and that Provence was sharing in a common and simultaneous development taking place in all the regions of southern France? A local enquiry would have suggested a local explanation, and the general characteristics of the phenomenon—the only important ones—would have escaped notice" (xii). The point could not be better expressed. The results of Brun's researches are in themselves an emphatic plea for the method I am here concerned to defend.

18 A. Meillet, *Caractères généraux des langues germaniques* (Paris, 1917), vii.

parisons? If one is to determine, not only in a general way, that two objects are not alike, but also—an infinitely more difficult but much more interesting task—by what precise characteristics they are distinguishable, the first step must obviously be to examine them one by one.

First of all, it is essential to clear the ground of false similarities, which are often merely homonymous. And some of them can be very insidious.

How often has English villeinage been treated as the equivalent of the French *servage* in the 13th, 14th, and 15th centuries. No doubt a rather cursory examination of them both could easily produce some points of resemblance. Both serfs and villeins were considered by jurists and by public opinion to be without "freedom," and were described in certain Latin documents as *servi*. (English writers, when expressing themselves in French, did not hesitate to use *serf* as synonymous with *villein*.) Because of this absence of "freedom" and this servile name, learned persons have been very ready to equate them with the Roman slaves. But this is a superficial analogy: the concept of "unfreedom" has varied greatly in content according to the period and the environment. Villeinage is in fact a specifically English institution. As Vinogradoff has shown in a work that has become a classic,[19] it drew its original characteristics from the very special political circumstances in which it was born.

As early as the second half of the 12th century, much earlier, that is, than their neighbours in France, the kings of England succeeded in getting the authority of their courts of justice recognised over the whole country. But this precocious development had its disadvantages. The state of society as then constituted meant that the judges came up against a frontier which they were not able to cross until the very end of the Middle Ages. They had to make sure never to intervene between feudal lords and those who held land from them in "villeinage," i.e. on payment of certain dues and especially labour services, both fixed by custom of the "manor." The status of these tenants varied considerably according to their origins. Some—the villeins properly speaking—were reckoned free, because they were simply

19 P. Vinogradoff, *Villeinage in England* (Oxford, 1892); naturally the literature is considerable. To tell the truth, there are few works dealing with the subject as a whole, even in English; see Pollock and Maitland, *The History of English Law before the Time of Edward I*, 2nd ed., (Cambridge, 1898), 1:356ff, 412ff; there are fewer still in French. I hope this will provide some excuse for the schematic way in which I have had to develop my argument.

dependent upon their lord by reason of their tenure, by the fact that they belonged to the *villa*; the others—*servi*, *nativi*—were tied to their master by personal and hereditary bonds, considered at this period to be a mark of servitude. But all of them, whatever their traditional status, were passed by when it was a question of royal jurisdiction. In their relationship with their lords (and only in these) they were completely outside the scope of the king's courts, and so of the law applied and elaborated by them, the *Common Law* of the realm. The result was that in the course of the 13th century they amalgamated, on the basis of this common incapacity—the most glaring and disadvantageous one conceivable—in spite of the original differences between them, and formed themselves into a single class. The lawyers had some difficulty in defining this new group, composed as it was of such diverse elements. But they very soon reached agreement, and they agreed on a formula which reserved the name of "freeman" for those alone among the king's subjects whom his courts were willing to protect against all others. This was a new notion of liberty.[20] The one-time villein, that is, the tenant pure and simple—if I may so call him—ceased to be numbered among the *liberi homines* and was confused with the hereditary *servus* or *nativus*, because like him he was without access to royal justice. These two words *servus* and *villein* came to be treated as synonymous. This had taken place by about the year 1300. At the same time certain obligations of an essentially servile nature—notably marriage dues—which should in principle have fallen only upon the descendants of the former *servi*, were gradually extended—at least in many of the manors—to all villeins (in the new sense of the word). This kind of contagion, common enough in mediaeval societies, was here able to spread with particular ease. The assimilation of one class to the other was no doubt quite wrong: but how could its victims have made any effective protest, since by definition they were unable to take their grievance before

20 New—or perhaps renewed. In the days when slavery proper existed, the slave had clearly had no other court of appeal against his master than the master himself. The free man depended on the law-courts of the tribe, either popular or royal. The progress of seignorial jurisdiction—less complete in England than on the continent—the development of a new form of personal and heritable attachment, which placed the individual among the unfree, had blurred the old conception and deprived it of its legal value, though probably without removing it altogether from men's minds. The renaissance of a national judicial system revived it. Mediaeval law, adapting its forms to the evolution of the facts, thus often found itself dipping into an ancient fund of popular representative institutions belonging to the more or less distant and forgotten past. We shall come across a striking example of this later on, when discussing the villein's services.

any other body but the lord's court, that is to say before the very person who profited by the abuse? And before long it was admitted that villeinage, like the former servitude, was hereditary. This was a movement in keeping with the general tendencies of the time. But here, it was still further accentuated by a special circumstance. From time to time it happened that a person of high standing acquired a holding in villeinage. Of course the land, although it had changed hands, remained subject to all the charges and disabilities that had formerly adhered to it, and which the new tenant must have been aware of—in particular the lack of protection of his possessory rights by the royal courts *vis-à-vis* his lord. But the holder himself—a great man in society, maybe—could not possibly have been reduced unceremoniously to the ranks of the unfree. The way out was to reintroduce a distinction between the condition of the land and the condition of the man, and to agree that no one but the descendants—all the descendants—of the original tenants should be classed as villeins. A new and lowly caste had been created. It was defined in law in terms of a principle readily formulated by the legal theorists, namely that the villein is a serf or slave (*servus*) in relation to his lord; that is to say no man, not even the king, may come between him and his lord. But there was nothing like this in France. There, royal justice was much slower in developing, and its progress took a quite different course. There were no great legislative enactments like those of Henry II in England. There was no strict classification of the means of action open to plaintiffs before the royal courts (like the English "writs"). It was by a series of incursions, often hardly premeditated, taking place earlier at one place, many years later at another, strengthened now by one precedent, then by another, that the king's men gained power over the country step by step. But their victories, just because of their leisureliness, and—to start with at any rate—because they were not guided by any theoretical plan, were more far-reaching in their effect. In France as in England, the lord's jurisdiction, which was an amalgam of powers with very diverse origins, covered widely differing groups of dependants—military vassals, citizens, freeholders and serfs. But the French monarchy treated the lord's jurisdiction as an indivisible whole. The royal courts allowed the *seigneur* to continue to try such and such a kind of case, or took it away from him; they either insisted, or did not insist, on the right of appeal; but in so doing they made no kind of distinction between the dependants of the lord. So it came to pass that gradually

the royal judge began to slip in between the *seigneur* and his tenant. Hence no reason arose for assimilating the freeholder to the serf, who was called a villein in France, too. The two classes of men would go on existing side by side up to the end. The French serf at the beginning of the 12th century, the *servus* or *nativus*, and the English *theow* of the same period, had belonged to very similar legal classes, which it is quite permissible to treat as two branches of one single institution. Then villeinage came into existence. There was no longer any parallel. The French serf of the 14th century and the English serf or villein of the same period belonged to two totally dissimilar classes. Is it worth even comparing them? It certainly is: but the point will now be to mark the contrasts between them, which will bring out a striking antithesis between the respective developments of the two nations.[21]

Let us pursue this comparison in still greater detail. It was not always easy in the English manor of the 13th and 14th centuries to distinguish with certainty, amidst the manifold variety of property rights, which holdings should be classed as tenancies in villeinage, and so carefully put in a class apart from the equally large medley of tenures for which the epithet "free" was reserved. Yet it was absolutely necessary to agree upon certain more or less fixed criteria; for it was necessary to be able to determine which were the lands—and hence, at least in origin, the tenants—whom royal justice could not protect, because rights of jurisdiction had been conferred upon the lord of the manor. In their efforts to discover these criteria, the lawyers sometimes reckoned to find them in the nature of the services attached to the land. They worked out a concept of servile labour.[22] It was agreed to treat as symptomatic of this all compulsory labour on the land whenever it

21 There is another and more subtle kind of misleading similarity when two institutions in two different societies seem to be designed for similar ends; but analysis shows these ends to be completely antithetical, and reveals that these institutions have arisen in response to absolutely opposite needs. An example of this would be the mediaeval and modern testamentary will on the one hand and the Roman will on the other. The former represents the "triumph" of individualism over "old family communism," the latter represents the exact opposite—it is an instrument designed to favour the omnipotence of the *pater familias*, taking its origin therefore not from any "tendency towards individualization" but on the contrary from a tremendous "concentration of the family." I take this example from a review by E. Durkheim in *L'Année sociologique* 5 (1900): 375, one of the most finished pieces of methodology that he has produced.

22 There was moreover some ambiguity about the expression of "servitium" in English legal language—or rather, in mediaeval language in general—used as the equivalent of "due" as well as of service properly speaking. I am here using the term only in the restricted sense.

implied the obligation to perform a large number of days' work, and above all whenever there was any element of uncertainty—either in the number of days due or the kind of work to be done, both of these being left to the arbitrary will of the lord. And it was generally admitted that the obligation to serve as the headman of the village (the *reeve*, not unlike the *starosta* with whom Russian novels have familiarised us) should likewise be considered as a taint upon the freedom of those who were forced by their terms of tenure, willy-nilly, to undertake this heavy burden. In establishing these norms the English lawyers and judges were not inventing anything. They were simply drawing upon a fund of collective experience which had been worked out in a more or less confused fashion for a long time by mediaeval society, on the continent as well as in England.

The idea that agricultural work in itself was in some way incompatible with freedom is in keeping with very ancient tendencies of the human mind. In the barbarian age it was embodied in the expression *opera servilia* often used to designate this kind of work. The idea that the *servus* differed from the freeholder because of the indeterminate character of the compulsory labour demanded of him, arising from the original contrast between the slave and the Roman *colonus*, was a very powerful one in Gaul and Italy during Carolingian days. It never completely disappeared. In France under the Capetian kings, was it not quite customary to give the label "franchises" to the privileges which, while not removing the peasants' obligations, set limits to them and especially fixed them?

As for the obligation to perform for the lord some particular specialised service that he might see fit to impose, in addition to the general burden of compulsory labour, a burden which in England consisted in filling the office of *reeve*, this was considered in many places in Germany to fall always upon unfree persons. In France, this notion, although less generally admitted, has nevertheless left some traces, particularly in the documents of the 12th century.[23] But in France—to which I confine myself here—these ideas as a whole were never embodied in any precise legal formulations, though one of them by itself—the emphasis on the degrading character of agricultural occupations—was, it is true, used in the 13th century to trace a clearer line of

23 I have referred to certain documents in "Un problème d'histoire comparée: la ministérialité en France et en Allemagne," *Revue historique du droit français et étranger* (1928): 46–91, here 49–50.

demarcation between the classes than had existed in the past. But it did not, as in England, serve to fix the frontier between the free and the non-free; it was rather used as one of the distinguishing features between the nobleman, who was allowed to "demean himself"—manual work being considered as, in a sense, derogatory—and the great multitude of non-nobles, which always—and now increasingly—included people whom no one would have dreamt of excluding from the category of the "free." But was there never any temptation in France, too, to define the unfree in terms of the particular services that they were bound to render? There are certainly some indications that people were not averse to making this kind of claim. At Gonesse, near Paris, about the beginning of the 13th century, certain tenants were considered by their neighbours as serfs because of the special forced labour incumbent upon them, particularly the task of escorting prisoners, which was thought to be a base service. But the tenants had no difficulty in getting the king to recognise that, legally speaking, there was no question but what they were free.[24] In their efforts to define a serf no lawyer or French law-court had recourse to any criterion based upon services rendered. Here then we come face to face with one of the most suggestive aspects of this contrast between two related societies.

Both of them exhibited analogous tendencies; but in one of them these remained vague and amorphous, and had no official backing, disappearing among the medley of ideas and feelings that constitute public opinion. In the other, they blossomed forth and were embodied in legal institutions of a very hard-and-fast kind.

It will be as well to dwell a little longer on the history of classes in mediaeval society. There is no study better calculated to disclose deep disharmonies within such societies—so deep, in truth, that we can hardly explain them at all and must, for the moment at any rate, be content to note them.

First, let us go back to Western and Central Europe about the 10th and 11th centuries. The idea that birth sets an immeasurable gulf between one man and another, a notion common to almost all periods, was certainly not absent from men's minds. In 987, in order to justify the exclusion of Charles

24 On this matter see my article "Les transformations du servage: à propos de deux documents du XIIIe siècle relatifs à la région parisienne," in *Mélanges d'histoire du Moyen Âge offerts à M. Ferdinand Lot par ses amis et ses élèves* (Paris, 1925), 55–74, here 55ff, where I was incidentally at fault in neglecting to compare the facts with those in England.

of Lorraine, candidate for the throne of France and the legitimate heir of the Carolingians, Archbishop Auberon—or, if you prefer it, the historian Richer, attributing to the prelate a speech that was perhaps a composite work, but was certainly in keeping with the ideas of the time—invoked the marriage contracted by the claimant to the throne with someone beneath his rank belonging to the vassal class.[25] And what son of a knight would have allowed himself to be considered on a par with the son of a serf or even a villein? But we must not deceive ourselves; rights, based upon inheritance, had little power at this period. Society was not so much a gradation of castes distinguished from one another by blood, but rather a somewhat confused tangle of groups based upon relationships of dependence. These ties of protection and obedience were the strongest that could be conceived. Even in the case of Charles of Lorraine, let us carefully note the turn taken spontaneously by Auberon's argument. There is no doubt that the bishop first reproaches the Carolingian prince with having contracted a misalliance in the strict sense of the word: "He has married a woman not his equal from the ranks of the vassals." But he immediately adds—remembering that this person's father had saved the dukes of France: "How the great duke [Hugh Capet] would suffer to know that the Queen had been chosen from among *his own vassals*!" This at once shifts the matter on to the personal plane. The servile condition itself was the only thing considered strictly hereditary: but even so it was not in practice strictly incompatible with the status of knighthood. As for the rights of freemen, they were dependent upon differences of locality, varieties of contractual relationships, the individual's social rank, as such, and not upon birth. Then came the 12th and 13th centuries. A silent but decisive modification took place in the ideas and legal outlook of the time. The strength of the personal bond was relaxed: homage tended, though very slowly, to become a solemn but rather empty form; the French serf, the "*homme de corps*," was from now on thought of much less as his lord's "man" than as the member of a despised class. On all sides classes based upon heredity were forming, each with its own legal rules. But what differences there were in the richness of this development![26] In England, villeinage was firmly

25 *Richeri historiarum libri* IIII, ed. G. H. Pertz (Hanover, 1839), Ch. 11.

26 Marc Bloch, "Un problème d'histoire comparée: la ministerialité en France et en Allernagne," *Revue historique de droit français et étranger* (1928): 46–91 especially 86, and *infra,* 503–28, and particularly 525–26.

established; but this was almost the only real class. Between free men, the law made no distinctions at all. In France, the lowest degree was serfdom, the members of which class would not henceforward be eligible for knighthood; at the top came the nobility, gradually differentiated from the rest of society by a series of special rights (sometimes simply survivals of ancient custom) relating to private law, criminal law and fiscal law. And lastly in Germany, from the 13th century onwards, the hierarchical idea developed with unparalleled vigour. The serf-knights, who had been eliminated in France by the crystallisation of class feeling, became in Germany the nucleus of a very well-defined social category. In the south of Germany there were even two such classes. The nobility on the one side, and the servile masses on the other, became broken up into a series of ranks graded one above the other; the nobles were not all equal in birth (*ebenbürtig*) or possessed the *connubium*. And jurists, working things out as they went, constructed the celebrated theory of the *Heerschild* in order to regulate the classification of the upper levels of society. They pictured a kind of ladder, each class having its own fixed place on one of the rungs. No one belonging to any one of these groups could, without loss of caste, accept a fief from a man lower down the scale.

Neighbouring and contemporary societies; in all cases a development in the same direction, stressing the hierarchical and the hereditary tendencies; but the progress and results of this development reveal such pronounced differences of degree that they are almost equivalent to a difference in kind, and in any case are marked by antitheses characteristic of their respective environments: this is the situation as revealed by the example I have briefly outlined to you. There were other contradictions, simpler to grasp if not to explain, flowing from another kind of divergence between these societies: in one society, the persistence, and in the neighbouring one the extinction, of institutions originally common to them both.

In the Carolingian period, over the territory that was later to be France, and over what was destined to become Germany, by far the larger share of that portion of the soil reserved for tenants was divided into tenements (as they were usually called in Romance countries), or Hufen (which was the Germanic term, usually rendered by the Latin *mansus*). Quite often there were several families of farmers settled on the same tenement. But in the eyes of the lord it did not therefore cease to be viewed as a unity. There were dues and services that bore upon the whole tenement in its entirety—or

rather, on its fragmented parts—on the plots of ground or buildings which it comprised. In principle, it was not permissible ever to subdivide any of these agrarian units. Now let us turn to France round about the year 1200. Hardly anywhere is there any further mention of the peasant tenement as a unit of assessment; where the word does survive in the Romance form of *meix* or *mas*, it is in the quite different sense of a house or centre from which the surrounding country is worked.[27] Those who drew up charters no longer assessed the extent of *seigneuries* in terms of the number of tenements they contained. The *censiers*, or lists of dues levied by the lord, were no longer content, as before, with enumerating the holdings: they set about it either by considering each separate piece aground in great detail, or at least each tenant. There were no more holdings composed of a fixed amount of land. Fields, vineyards and gardens could all be split up quite independently of one another between hereditary holders and various newcomers who had acquired them. In Germany on the other hand the *Hufe*, which was still not allowed to be subdivided, continued in the majority of manors to form the basis for the levying of rents or services. It, too, was destined in the end to disappear, though only slowly, and often earlier in name than in fact; for up to the end of the feudal period, the German lords sought to preserve by various means the principle of indivisibility of holdings. No parallel efforts were made, it would seem, by their French counterparts. The contrast certainly appears to be an extremely ancient one, seeing that the gradual crumbling away of the peasant tenement in the western part of the Frankish Empire is observable as early as the reign of Charles the Bald.[28] I am not even going to attempt to examine the reasons for this here. But I think you will admit that any French or German agrarian history omitting to consider this

27 This was moreover the original meaning (the relationship between *mansus* and *manese* is obvious). The tenure had been called after the house, "mother of the field," as the Scandinavian documents express it. The derived sense had taken on a technical meaning, which disappeared along with the institution that it designated. The first sense of the word survived or was resuscitated. Naturally one can discover here and there some survivals of the "manse" in the ancient sense of the word, as a unit of taxation, late examples which bear witness both to the past state of affairs and to the general revolution which only a few *seigneuries*, here and there, managed to escape.

28 *Capitularia regum Francorum*, vol. 2, no. 273, ch. 30, 323. One is tempted to put alongside this document the information already provided by Gregory of Tours, *Historia Francorum,* X, 7, about the splitting up of *possessiones*, the basis of the general Romano-Frankish system of taxation; but this is not the place to go into the relationships between the Frankish manse and the Roman *caput*—an extremely intricate question.

question would be neglecting an essential part of its task. If we took into account one country only, the demise of the peasant tenement here and its survival in the other country would appear to be one of those quite natural phenomena that did not need to be explained. Only comparison shows that there is a real problem here, and this in itself is a step forward: for is there a greater danger in any branch of science than the temptation to think that everything happens "quite naturally"?

VII

Although one of the essential tasks in comparative linguistics today is the tracing of the original characteristics of the various languages, it is nonetheless true that its first efforts have been directed rather towards another objective—the determination of kinship among the languages, and the search for mother-tongues. One of the most impressive successes of the comparative method has been the delimitation of the Indo-European group, the reconstruction—no doubt hypothetical, yet based on well-founded conjecture—of the basic forms of the original "Indo-European" language. The history of social organisation is in this respect a much more difficult problem. The fact is that a language presents a much more unified and easily definable framework than any system of institutions: hence the relative simplicity of the problem of linguistic affiliations. "Up to now," writes Meillet, "no case has been discovered giving cause for the belief that the morphological system of a given language is the result of the intermingling of the morphologies of two distinct languages. In all cases so far observed, a language presents a continuous tradition," whether this tradition be "of the current type—the transmission of the language from the adults to the children"—or whether it arises "from a change of language." But let us suppose that at a given moment examples are discovered of this phenomenon so far unknown—"real mixtures" between languages. When that happens (I am still quoting M. Meillet) "linguistics will have to devise new methods."[29] Now the historian of societies finds that the facts themselves impose upon him this formidable hypothesis of "mixtures," which, if realised in the linguistic field, would be such a disturbing in-

29 A. Meillet, *La méthode comparative en linguistique historique* (Oslo, 1925), 82, 83.

fluence in that humane science which is rightly most self-confident. The fact that French has been deeply influenced in its vocabulary and no doubt also in its phonetics by the Germanic languages is of little consequence: there was also some transformation, involuntary and as often as not unconscious, in the Latin language as spoken in Roman Gaul. The descendants of the Teutons who adopted the Romance dialects virtually changed over from one language to the other. But who would venture to represent French mediaeval society as a transformation pure and simple of Gallo-Roman society? Comparative history can reveal to us interactions between human societies which were previously unknown; but, when confronted with societies so far considered as lacking any ancestry in common, it would be foolish to expect to discover detached fragments, broken off long ago from the original mother-society whose existence was previously unsuspected; to seek for them would be to nurse a hope destined almost always to be disappointed.

In certain exceptional cases, however, comparison may reveal among societies with very different histories a series of extremely ancient relationships. It would obviously be absurdly rash to jump to the conclusion that these were directly interrelated; but it would seem reasonable to take them as evidence that in a very remote past there was a certain community of make-up in civilization as a whole. The idea of making use of the study of agrarian customs to reconstruct the ethnic map of Europe before the time of written documents is one that occurred long ago to a variety of research workers. No one can fail to recognise Meitzen's great contribution, but it is generally admitted today that it ended in bankruptcy. Without entering into the details of this failure, we may perhaps indicate the essential faults in method which must be held responsible for it: (1) Meitzen confused the study of different categories of fact, when a more correct method would have begun to distinguish such things as the pattern of settlement and the lay-out; (2) he postulated a "primitive" character for a number of phenomena observed in historical times, and often quite recent times, forgetting that they might well have been the result of relatively recent changes; (3) be paid too exclusive attention to examining facts of a material nature, at the expense of social customs which were reflected in the facts; (4) he only took for his ethnic elements those groups that were historically attested Celts, Teutons, Slavs, etc.—who were all newcomers to their habitats, thus refusing *a priori* to admit that any part had been played by the nameless mass of people previously established on the land—the "sub-

stratum," to use the linguist's term—though there is no indication that they were destroyed by the invaders, nor that they had been obliged to abandon the whole of their previous customs and way of life. There is an important lesson to be learned from these mistakes: it is not that one should give up the enquiry, but rather pursue it in a more critical spirit and by more prudent methods. Straight away, it is essential to note certain facts. Land in fragmented parcels, in long narrow fields without enclosures, covered enormous tracts of Europe: England, Northern and Central France, almost the whole of Germany, and no doubt also a large part of Poland and Russia. This was in contradistinction to other very different forms of land arrangement: the almost square fields of Southern France, and the enclosed eastern parts of France and England. In short, the agrarian map of Europe is completely at variance with its political and linguistic map. It is perhaps earlier than either of these last two. This is at least a possible conjecture. For the moment, our task is to collect the facts rather than to explain them. To confine ourselves for the moment to the very striking extension, across societies apparently separated in every other way, of the first type of land-system referred to above (long open strips in scattered ownership) it is only too clear *a priori* that it will be our duty to try out a variety of explanations one after the other. We must consider as possible ones not only a kinship among primitive civilizations, but also the hypothesis of borrowings, and the spread of certain technical processes about a primitive centre. But one thing is certain: we shall never arrive at a complete understanding of the English open-field system, the German *Gewanndorf*, or the French *champs ouverts*, by examining England, Germany or France alone.

It becomes equally clear moreover—and this is perhaps the clearest and most cogent lesson to be drawn from comparative history—that it is high time to set about breaking down the outmoded topographical compartments within which we seek to confine social realities, for they are not large enough to hold the material we try to cram into them. A certain worthy scholar some time ago wrote a whole book on *Les Templiers en Eure-et-Loir*.[30] We can but smile at such ingenuousness. But can any of us who are

30 Ch. Métais, *La Templiers en Eure-et-Loir* (Chartres, 1896); examples of this kind of anachronism are less rare than one would imagine. In the same *département* I could refer to: H. Lehr, *La Réforme et les églises réformées dans le département actuel d'Eure-et-Loir (1523–1911)* (Chartres, 1912); in a neighboring region: Abbé Denis, *Lectures sur l'histoire de l'agriculture dans le département de Seine-et-Marne* (Meaux, 1881); the greater part of the volume deals with the period before the Revolution.

historians be quite sure that we are not constantly guilty of the same failing? To be sure, it is hardly correct practice to transpose the *départements* into the Middle Ages. But how often have the frontiers of existing States not been treated as a convenient framework for such and such a study of the legal or economic institutions of the past? There are two errors here. First, anachronism, and that of the most obvious kind. It must be some sort of blind faith in a vague historical predestination that has led people to attribute to these mere lines on a map some definite meaning, some prenatal existence—if I may so call it—before the precise moment when the complicated interplay of wars and treaties actually fixed them. Then there is a more fundamental error too, which still persists even when one uses what appears to be a more exact method of selecting the facts for research according to contemporary political, administrative, or national divisions; for where has it ever happened that social phenomena, in any period, have obligingly and with one accord stopped their development at the same boundaries, these being precisely the same as those of political rule or nationality? It is a universally acknowledged fact that the line of demarcation, or, if you prefer it, the marginal zone between those who spoke the *langue d'oil* and those who spoke the *langue d'oc*, or the boundary of the *langue d'oil* on the Germanic side, does not correspond to any State frontier or great feudal estate. The same is true of many other facts in the history of civilization. If you study the French towns of the Middle Ages when the urban renaissance is taking place, you will be trying to comprehend in one sweep two objects almost totally dissimilar in every way, except in name. The ancient Mediterranean towns on the one hand, the traditional centres of the life of the plains, the *oppida* inhabited from time immemorial by the great men, the lords, the "knights"; on the other, the towns in the rest of France, inhabited above all by merchants, who re-created them. What arbitrary cut with the scissors would justify us in separating this latter urban type from the analogous types of the German Rhineland? Or when the historian has begun by studying the *seigneurie* to the north of the Loire, and then turns to the documents of Languedoc, does he not often feel further removed from his own country than when he is looking at documents from Hainault or even the Moselle?

Whatever particular aspect of European social life is being studied, and at whatever period, the student must find his own geographical framework,

fixed not from outside but from within, if he wishes to escape from a world of artificiality. This will be a difficult piece of research, needing a great deal of circumspection and much feeling of one's way; but to refuse to undertake it would be an open admission of mental laziness.

VIII

How are we to set about this in practical terms?

It goes without saying that the comparison will be valueless unless based on the study of facts gleaned from detailed, critical, and reliable documentary research. It is no less evident that human frailty makes it useless to dream of firsthand research in geographical or chronological fields that are too vast. Moreover, it seems inevitable that comparative history properly speaking should always be reserved for a small section of historians. It would perhaps seem to be time to think of organising it and in particular giving it some place in the teaching of the universities.[31] All the same, we must not hide from ourselves the fact that since research in many fields is still at a rather backward stage, comparative study can itself only expect to make slow progress. It is always the same old story: it requires years of analysis before there is material for one day's synthesis.[32] This maxim is too often quoted without adding the necessary corrective; "analysis" can only be

31 I think I should here add a further problem peculiar to the French universities, and therefore not suitable for enlarging upon at Oslo. Our higher education is hamstrung by the requirements of the *licence*, and still more so, in the main faculties, by the syllabus for the *agrégation*, which reaches the teachers ready made from the hands of the responsible authority, namely the *jury*. Neither of these, it is true, is limited to the history of France; they almost always include some questions on foreign history; but, for reasons of practical convenience, and quite legitimate ones, these questions are regularly presented in a national framework. The result is that the teacher may well be inclined to give his lessons or direct his pupils' studies along the lines of English or German institutions, for example; if he is not to neglect the infinitely important interests of the pupils committed to his charge, he can only under very exceptional circumstances reserve a place in his teaching for certain problems that positively demand to be treated today along comparative lines, such as the system of lord and vassal in Western Europe, the development of urban societies, and the agrarian revolution. Teaching and research being in the nature of the case closely bound up with one another, and both having much to gain by mutual support, one can sec how damaging this situation is to our studies.

32 The exact wording is: "Pour un jour de synthèse il faut des années d'analyse"; see Fustel de Coulanges, *La Gaule romaine*, ed. C. Jullian (Paris, 1875), xiii. Compare with the reflections of Henri Berr, "Projets d'articles du vocabulaire historique," *Bulletin du centre international de Synthèse* (June 1928): 22–49, here 28.

transformed into "synthesis" if it has had the latter in view from the beginning and has been deliberately designed to serve that purpose.

The authors of monographs must be once again reminded that it is their duty to read the literature previously published on subjects analogous to theirs, and not only that bearing upon their own region—which they all do read—not only that concerning immediately neighbouring regions—which they nearly all do read—but also (something too often neglected) that dealing with more distant societies, separated by differences of political constitution or nationality from those they are studying. I will even venture to add: not only general text-books, but also if possible detailed monographs, of a parallel kind to the ones they are themselves undertaking, which will generally be found much more lively and satisfying than extensive summaries. In the course of reading they will find material for their questionnaires, and, maybe, some guiding hypotheses suitable for directing their researches until such time as their own progress will clearly show them as they go whether these provisional guides need correcting or abandoning. They will learn not to attach too much importance to local pseudo-causes; at the same time they will learn to become sensitive to specific differences.

This invitation to scholars to pursue this preliminary enquiry by means of books does not mean that they are being invited to follow an easy path. I will not go into the details of the material inconveniences that confront them, but there is no harm in recalling the fact that they are by no means inconsiderable. Bibliographical information is difficult to collect, and the books themselves more difficult still to come by. A good international library loan system, developed and extended to certain great countries who have up till now jealously kept their riches to themselves, would do more for the future of comparative history than a great deal of good advice. But the principal obstacle is an intellectual one; it concerns fixed habits of work; but even these, no doubt, are not impossible to reform.

The linguist who has made a special study of a particular language and wants to gather some information about the general characteristics of another language does not usually meet with much difficulty. The grammar he consults sets out the facts classified in a manner not very different from the one he himself uses and explains them in formulae more or less parallel with the ones he is familiar with. But how much less happily placed the historian is! If, for example, he is familiar with French society and wishes to place

one aspect of it side by side with something analogous that a neighbouring society—let us say Germany—has to offer, he turns over the pages of some works devoted to the latter, only to find himself—even if they are the most elementary text-books—having to grope his way all of a sudden in what seems to be a new world. Is it simply the difference of language? Not precisely, for in principle there is no reason why two scientific vocabularies should not correspond pretty exactly as between one language and another. The natural sciences provide many examples of such agreement. The difficulty is that as between the German and the French work most of the words simply do not correspond. How is one to translate into French the German *Hörige*, or into German the French *tenancier*? One can see some possible translations, but these are mostly periphrases (one might translate *Hörigen* as those who depended on the *seigneurie*) or approximations (*Zinsleute* would only do for *tenanciers en censive*, a particular case of a more general idea);[33] and very often—as in the translation suggested for *Hörigen*—these expressions are only moderately common, and do not occur in the books. It would be understandable if this absence of parallelism could be explained by a too obstinate faithfulness to popular mediaeval usage preserved by both languages, whose divergences were a historical fact that had simply to be accepted. But this is far from being the case. The majority of these dissonant terms are entirely the creation of the historians; or at any rate they are the people who have given both precision and extension to the sense in which these terms are used. Rightly or wrongly, and more or less unconsciously, we have elaborated technical vocabularies. Each national school has constructed its own without taking any notice of its neighbor. European history has thus become a veritable Babel. Hence the formidable dangers that lie in wait for inexperienced research-workers—and after all, do not all experts deserve this epithet once they are outside their own domain? I was once in touch with a worker who was studying, in a one-time Teutonic country, some common land used by several villages together, that is to say what the German books, at any rate of a certain period, call a *Mark*.[34] I had the greatest difficulty

33 Naturally one could put something like "Inhaber der Leihegüter"—but who would use an expression like that? *Hörige*, moreover, does not quite represent *tenancier*: the meaning is more general. In Spanish, as I was able to satisfy myself when working on a translation, there is literally no word equivalent to "*tenure*."

34 Today there can be absolutely no doubt that the word never really bore this narrowly specialised mean-

in persuading him that analogous practices existed—and sometimes still exist—outside Germany, in numberless countries, and notably in France; for French books have no special word for this kind of common land.

But this discordance in vocabulary is hardly more than the expression of a deeper disharmony. On all sides we have French, German, Italian, English studies going on; but hardly ever are they asking the same questions. I quoted just now an example of these perpetual cross-purposes on the subject of agrarian changes. It would not be very difficult to produce others equally eloquent of the situation: the administrative class, for example, has been up to now a completely neglected subject, in France and in England, in descriptions of mediaeval society; or legal rights, which have been discussed in the various countries under completely different schemes of classification. A historian may well be led to wonder whether a certain institution or fact in his own national past is to be found elsewhere too, and if so, with what modifications due to checks in development or greater expansion; but it is more often than not impossible for him to satisfy this legitimate curiosity. When he finds nothing on the subject in the books he consults, he may well wonder whether their silence is to be explained by the silence of the facts themselves, or by the state of oblivion into which a great problem has been allowed to fall.

This congress will, I think, be much concerned with reconciliation between nations by means of history. Do not be alarmed: I am not going to attempt any impromptu treatment of this most delicate of all themes. Comparative history as I see it is a purely scientific discipline, orientated towards knowledge and not towards practical results. But what would you say about attempting a reconciliation of our terminologies and our questionnaires? Let us address ourselves in the first place to the authors of general text-books, for they hold the first place of importance as informers and guides. We will not ask them for the moment to abandon the national framework in which their work is ordinarily done. It is clearly an artificial one, but it is still imposed by practical needs. Only gradually will the pursuit of knowledge adapt itself on this point to a position more in keeping with the true facts. But we appeal to them here and now not to forget that they will be read beyond their

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ing, but should be considered, like *Allmende*, as equivalent to *communal*; see G. v. Below, "Allmende und Markgenossenschaft," *Vierteljahrschrift für Sozial- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte* 1 (1903): 120–23.

national frontiers. We beg them, as we have already besought the authors of monographs, to base their plan, the treatment of the problems they raise, even the terms they use, on the knowledge gleaned from work carried out in other countries. In this way, through mutual good will, a common scientific language in the highest sense—a collection of symbols and a system of classification—will progressively come into being. Comparative history will thus become easier to understand and to serve, and will inspire local studies with its own spirit—those local studies without which it is powerless, but which can themselves only come to fruition with its help. In a word, let us stop talking about the history of one nation and then of another without attempting to understand them—a course which leads to no understanding. A dialogue between deaf men, in which each one answers the other's questions all wrong, is an ancient comic device on the stage, getting an easy laugh from an audience which is always ready to be amused; but it is not really to be recommended as a serious intellectual exercise.

[Translated by J. E. Anderson]