2 Comparison

Its Use and Misuse in Social and Economic History

Alessandro Stanziani

A few years ago, Gareth Austin, a well-known economic historian specialising in Africa, took up Kenneth Pomeranz and R. Bing Wong's proposal to develop a form of 'reciprocal comparison' in which Africa (Austin's case) and China (Pomeranz and Wong's) would not be compared exclusively to the Western model as the exemplary scenario and exclusive yardstick.[1] The fundamental aim of these proposals was to break free from the 'Eurocentrism' underlying most economic history analysis. As Austin asserted, the point was not to reject any general model of economic development but rather to widen the definitions of city, market and private property to include practices found in non-European worlds.

Unfortunately, in practice, this claim turned into its reverse: Pomeranz and Austin ended up assigning to non-European countries features usually associated with more or less idealised Western countries. Thus, the Yangzi had real competitive markets and private property rules, while Ghana and other African countries might have had the same if corruption had not intervened. While at first sight it seems politically correct not to call Africans 'underdeveloped' or 'naturally hostile' to capitalism, ascribing them a proto-market economy was not empirically true and expressed a vision of comparison modelled on faith in the one capitalist world after the collapse of 'actually existing socialism'. Unlike the economic anthropology of the 1960s and the 1970s, which scoured the world for 'alternative' economic rationalities, this new approach sought to show that capitalist values had been globally widespread for centuries. Yet after the enthusiasm for globalisation and global history, after the long financial crisis and the return of nationalisms in response precisely to globalisation, we need something other than mere enthusiasm for capitalist values. It makes no

[1] Gareth Austin, 'Reciprocal Comparison and African History: Tackling Conceptual Eurocentrism in the Study of Africa's Economic Past', *African Studies Review* 50, 3 (2007), 1–28; Kenneth Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence: China, Europe, and the Making of the Modern World Economy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 8; R. Bin Wong, *China Transformed: Historical Change and the Limits of European Experience* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997).

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sense to compare the Chinese, the African or the Indian 'case' exclusively to an ideal model of the West.

A first solution would be to take a closer look at non-Western values and categories of thought, such as Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam. Anthropologists, along with specialists in area studies and the second generation of subaltern studies (the first being mostly concerned with the social history of the peasantry), advanced this solution when making explicit or implicit comparisons. Thus, Dipesh Chakrabarty's approach has the virtue of questioning the categories we use when we think about our world in comparison to others, and insisting on the need to take the values of other cultures into consideration.[2] It is perfectly legitimate to wonder if there are equivalents in other cultures to Western notions such as human rights, civil society, cosmopolitanism[3] or even religion and secularism.[4] This attention to 'alternative' values is necessary and welcome, but it also carries a risk. The insistence on 'genuine' Hindu, Chinese or Muslim values is a feature of nationalist political projects, but it also influenced several attempts made by Western specialists in so-called area studies to oppose the European perspective to a world history seen from a Chinese, Islamic or African perspective.[5]

This is a dangerous path: by emphasising more or less monolithic entities called 'cultures' or 'civilisations' or 'area studies', historians tend to overlook the cross-pollination and reciprocal influences that occur between 'cultures', which are never monolithic entities. This is one of the chief criticisms that 'connected history' has levelled against subaltern studies. Sanjay Subrahmanyam, and supporters of entangled or connected history in general, has persistently stressed how European values and practices have been profoundly affected by interactions and exchanges with non-European worlds.[6] Connected history has sought to overcome this wall of opposing civilisations and, while initially strongly critical of comparisons, Subrahmanyam recently acknowledged the possibility of using them.[7]

[2] Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe. Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

[3] Karen O'Brien, *Narratives of Enlightenment: Cosmopolitan History from Voltaire to Gibbon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Corinne Lefèvre et al. (eds.), *Cosmopolitismes en Asie du Sud: Sources, itinéraires, langues, XVI^{e}-XVIII^{e} siècles* (Paris: EHESS, 2015).

[4] Nilufer Göle, 'La laïcité républicaine et l'islam public', *Pouvoirs* 115, 4 (2005), 73–86.

[5] One recent example of this attitude: James Belich et al. (eds.), *The Prospect of Global History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

[6] Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Is Indian Civilization a Myth?* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2013); Serge Gruzinski, *Les quatre parties du monde: Histoire d'une mondialisation* (Paris: Seuil, 2004).

[7] Sanjay Subrahmanyam, 'Between Eastern Africa and Western India, 1500–1650: Slavery, Commerce, and Elite Formation', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 61, 4 (2019), 805–34.

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At the same time, the opposition between comparison, presumed to be subjective, and connection, viewed as objective and obvious, weakens entangled history and connected history in general.[8] It seems senseless to oppose *l'histoire croisée* and connected history to comparative history.[9] This is all the more relevant since comparisons actually connect entities, and create relationships between them, precisely by looking for analogies and differences. They also connect objects by comparing them according to a list of criteria. The connections found in archives are no less subjective than the comparisons made by the historian. Archives and documents are never ready-made; they are the product of the efforts made by the administrations, companies and actors at their source, and later by archivists and their classifications, and ultimately by historians who select a given document and present it in an equally particular way. In fact, each comparison requires a metalanguage and, if not a proper translation, at least an exercise of commensurability between terms and within a given methodological framework.[10]

Therefore, this chapter will not question the terms of comparison and analogy in abstract methodological models; instead, it will place actors and debates in their appropriate historical context in order to understand why they were interested in comparison and why, in a given context, they practised it in one particular way and not in another. Moreover, each context will be resolutely transregional and comparison will be identified as a cross-cultural practice. I will therefore take my distance from current arguments relating comparison only to European colonial expansion.[11] This is certainly true in some periods and for some authors, but not for all. Infra-European tensions and competition were no less important in justifying comparisons than encounters with non-European worlds. The history of comparative investigations reveals precisely that the identification of 'us' and the 'others', of Europe, or the West, and the 'rest' was an extremely variegated exercise in both its approach and its conclusions, and it contributed to the mutual identification, and not just opposition, of all these terms. The interesting point to identify is how these multiple levels of comparison, geopolitical tensions and cultural transfers intervened in specific contexts. Even if comparison has been practised since Antiquity (both in Western and Asian historiographies),[12] or, even more radically, as some

[8] Michael Werner and Bénédicte Zimmermann (eds.), *De la comparaison à l'histoire croisée* (Paris: Seuil, 2004).

[9] Heinz-Gerhard Haupt and Jürgen Kocka (eds.), *Comparative and Transnational History: Central European Approaches and New Perspectives* (New York: Berghahn, 2009).

[10] Willibald Steinmetz (ed.), *The Force of Comparison. A New Perspective on Modern European History and the Contemporary World* (New York: Berghahn, 2019), in particular 'Introduction', 1–33.

[11] Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973); Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).

[12] Marcel Detienne, 'Rentrer au village: Un tropisme de l'hellénisme?', *L'Homme* 157, 1 (2001), 137–49; G. E. R. Lloyd, *The Ambitions of Curiosity: Understanding the World in Ancient Greece and China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

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anthropologists and biologists argue, since the Palaeolithic, and even if it became more widely used in the Middle Ages in its analogic forms, I will mostly focus on the period from the eighteenth century to the present day. This is not to follow Michel Foucault who, in *Les mots et les choses* (1966), argued that comparison presented a major break in the seventeenth century, when the episteme moved from analogy to classification and distinction.[13] The problem is that there is little empirical evidence of such a shift. Instead, as we will see, the two forms of comparison coexisted over the long run. Thus, my focus on the last three centuries responds to the epistemological evidence: comparison, as a form of translation, and analytical reflection are coessential to the relationships between the so-called human sciences, social sciences and natural sciences. The very possibility of identifying and separating these fields became relevant only from the eighteenth century onwards. I will begin with the eighteenth-century Enlightenment and its comparative philosophical anthropology; I will then move to the nineteenth century (Karl Marx, Max Weber) and the twentieth, examining the use and misuse of Weber (and Marx) during the decolonisation process and the Cold War, before arriving at global history nowadays. I will also evoke the Durkheimian approach to the comparative history of societies and its historical translation in the French *Annales* school, not to forget the comparative approaches in social and economic anthropology. I will conclude by suggesting some possible ways to practise comparisons in a global perspective.

Eurocentric Comparison: A Stain on the Enlightenment?

The Enlightenment raised two major relevant questions in comparison: on the one hand, the Eurocentrism of comparatism; on the other, the epistemological tension between historical sources and broader philosophical categories and thought. On the first point, subaltern, orientalist, post-modernist and finally global studies strongly criticise the Enlightenment as the source of Eurocentrism. In their view, most eighteenth-century authors explicitly or implicitly compared a more or less idealised European civilisation to 'other' backward areas and civilisations.[14] Along a similar line, nowadays supporters of 'multiple modernities' erroneously mix up present-day approaches and those of the Enlightenment.[15] In fact, most of today's critical judgements reflect less

[13] Michel Foucault, *Les mots et les choses: Une archéologie des sciences humaines* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966), ch, 2, in particular 68–72.

[14] On these critics, Sebastian Conrad, *What Is Global History?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016); Alessandro Stanziani, *Eurocentrism and the Politics of Global History* (New York: Palgrave, 2018).

[15] *Multiple Modernities*, special issue of Daedalus 129, 1 (2000); Dominic Sachsenmaier et al. (eds.), *Reflections on Multiple Modernities: European, Chinese and Other Interpretations* (Leiden: Brill 2002).

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the original aim of eighteenth-century authors than their influential interpretations over the following centuries. In the eighteenth century, comparison was made not on the basis of economic or sociological models – these fields did not yet exist – but starting from philosophy and physiology. Most authors compared the attitudes individuals had to 'developing' their body and personality; the category of 'backwardness' (retardation) was first applied to individuals (their bodily or psychological backwardness). But then, differences between individual capacities were turned into differences in social status in order to criticise the 'old regime'. This passage from the individual to society finally led to different societies being compared in time and space.[16] However, authors never compared different modernities and civilisations for the very simple reason that they constantly employed the term 'civilisation' in the singular: there was not a European or an Indian or Arab civilisation, but one single civilisation of humankind. The question instead was whether different values contributed equally to progress and civilisation, or whether some values, institutions and people were more advanced than others. The first approach imagined multiple scales of time and values and therefore compared countries in order to understand their possible mutual influence.[17] The latter attitude, by contrast, imagined that some countries were more advanced than others on the scale of time and that their values would ultimately prevail over the rest. Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Pietro Giannone were in the first group, together with the later versions of the Abbé Raynal's *Histoire des deux Indes*. Diderot and Montesquieu, as well as many 'economists' – the French physiocrats – tended to express the second attitude.

However, Europeans did not just reflect on the 'others'. For much of the eighteenth century, for example, the French and the British constantly compared themselves to each other in terms of economic and social progress, warfare, science, population, techniques and so forth. This was because of the fierce competition between the two powers in Europe and on a global scale as they went about consolidating their respective empires. These two stakes – the nation and the empire – went together. Moreover, this was not just a European attitude, but one that was widespread in China, the Ottoman Empire and Russia, among others, where local elites compared themselves with the European powers.[18] In all these cases, comparisons expressed not only the influence of contradictory attitudes that Western European thinkers exerted outside of their country, but also the emergence of new paradigms of

[16] Michael Eggers, *Vergleichendes Erkennen: Zur Wissenschaftsgeschichte und Epistemologie des Vergleichs und zur Genealogie des Komparatistik* (Heidelberg: Winter, 2016).
[17] Jürgen Osterhammel, *Unfabling the East: The Enlightenment's Encounter with Asia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018).
[18] Alessandro Stanziani, *Les entrelacements du monde* (Paris: CNRS Éditions, 2018).

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comparison in non-European countries.[19] Several authors reflected on comparison and expressed similar methodologies, some looking for 'universal values' and others associating the very notion of 'specificity' with longue durée persistent features in culture, institutions and the like. Reciprocal influence between thinkers in these areas was the rule. For example, Diderot believed in the reforming potential of Catherine the Great and the French monarchy.[20] Based on this belief, he distinguished between nations that had already achieved their highest level of civilisation and were starting to degenerate and those that remained closer to nature and could strive for a higher level of order and morality while avoiding the evils of civilisation. He placed America and Russia among the latter.[21]

After the 1770s, major political and social events pushed several philosophers to redefine their notion of progress, and therefore the object and content of their comparisons. The Pugachev uprising in Russia (1773–75) and the protests by masters and apprentices against the abolition of the guilds in France rapidly led to a revision of the enlightened monarchs' projects in both countries. From the 1780s on, Diderot and Condillac associated their scepticism about enlightened despotism with a more general criticism of European civilisation.[22] In other words, the encounter with Russia not only led French authors to reflect on France and Europe, but also to eventually reverse the tension between 'advanced' and 'backward' countries. In turn, this was not a one-way cultural exchange between a presumed 'centre' and a 'periphery' of Europe (Russia); beyond the impact of the Russian experience on French reflections on modernity, this two-way avenue of reflection produced original thinking in Russia itself. Here, besides followers of French revolutionary thinkers such as Alexander Nikolayevich Radishchev,[23] others adopted a more moderate attitude. Mikhailo Mikhailevich Shcherbatov claimed to be inspired by the French *philosophes* when he suggested keeping Peter the

[19] Sheldon Pollock, *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men: Sanskrit, Culture, and Power in Premodern India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006); José Rabasa and Daniel Woolf (eds.), *The Oxford History of Historical Writing*, vol. 3: *1400–1800* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

[20] Denis Diderot, 'Questions de Diderot et réponses de Catherine II sur la situation économique de l'Empire russe', in Maurice Tourneux, *Diderot et Catherine II* (Paris: Calmann Lévy, 1899), 532–57.

[21] Denis Diderot, 'Observations sur le Nakaz de Catherine II', in Denis Diderot, *Oeuvres politiques* (Paris: Garnier, 1963), 329–458, here 365.

[22] Michèle Duchet, *Anthropologie et histoire au siècle des Lumières: Buffon, Voltaire, Rousseau, Helvétius, Diderot* (Paris: Maspero, 1971), 134–5.

[23] Vladimir I. Moriakov, *Iz istorii evoliutsii obshchestvenno-politicheskikh vzgliadov prosvetitelei kontsa XVIII veka: Reinal' i Radishchev* [On the History of the Evolution of the Socio-political Orientations of Institutors During the Eighteenth Century: Raynal and Radishchev] (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Moskovskogo Universiteta, 1981).

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Great's Table of Ranks.[24] These reinterpretations of the French Enlightenment in Russia did not express the 'distortions' of Russian authors but instead reflected the ambivalences of the Enlightenment itself and the cross-pollination across the Urals. They were anything but a monolithic 'centre versus periphery' phenomenon, as critics of European cultural imperialism often state.

In short, comparison in the Enlightenment expressed a philosophical attitude which sought to identify an epistemological framework to reflect on human civilisation as a whole. Within this overall attitude, one tendency consisted in measuring 'backward' areas in the light of the most advanced ones, while, conversely, another approach considered that the 'corruption' of Europe could be solved by learning from the 'savage' areas. How did the nineteenth century modify this exchange? To answer this question, we need to consider three major trends in comparative approaches during the nineteenth century, linked with the names of Marx, Durkheim and Weber.

Marx: Champion of Comparative Eurocentrism?

Nineteenth-century comparisons owed much to the emergence of positivism and the influence the natural sciences had on the social sciences. The former further developed reflections and practices on classifications which, once adopted by the social sciences, encouraged normative attitudes: comparison, based on the classification of societies, was a tool not just to understand but also to orient social change and public policies. In this context, Marxist forms of comparison raised two major concerns: on the one hand, again, the Eurocentrism of this approach; on the other, the tension between a general model and 'local' exceptions. As a great admirer of Charles Darwin, and also with the aim of criticising 'vulgar socialism', Marx sought to fill the gap between these fields. This is one of the reasons why Dipesh Chakrabarty considers Marx's approach poorly suited to explaining contexts such as India. But this is not the only point; the relevant question is why and how did Marx himself imagine 'Europe', 'India' and 'Asia' and compare them? During the second half of the nineteenth century, the question arose in the main countries of Europe as to whether the 'historical laws of development' were the same everywhere. At that time, several countries in Southern and Eastern Europe, and also outside Europe (Japan, Latin America), stopped closing themselves off to European influence and instead sought to steer their own path to industrialisation and 'modernisation'.

[24] See 'Razmotrenie o voprose: Mogut li dvoriane zapisyvat'sia v kuptsy [Notes on the Question: Can Nobles Register as Merchants?]', in Mikhail M. Shcherbatov, *Neizdannye sochineniia* [Unpublished Works] (Moscow: Sotsekgiz, 1935), 139–58.

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In this context, in the first volume of *Capital*, as earlier in the *Critique of Political Economy* and *The Communist Manifesto*, Marx accused classical political economy of putting forward abstract theories and laws that failed to take into account the historically situated nature of capitalism. He opposed the abstraction of economics to concrete, empirical analyses of societies and their history. In reality, he was less critical of models in general than of those who dehistoricised capitalism, such as the authors of the classical school. Indeed, his own approach led him to identify simultaneously the historical singularity of capitalism and its 'general laws'. Marx adopted comparatism, but only to insert it into the wider laws of history. As a Hegelian, Marx was not against general theories and historical laws, only certain interpretations of this process. Marx did not criticise political economy for abstraction as such, but rather the particular form that naturalised capitalism. Instead, he proposed a schema meant to be both historical and general, with claims to universality. The passage from feudalism to capitalism is valid everywhere, along with the main characteristics of capitalist dynamics: alienation and commodification of labour, the monetisation of trade and commodity fetishism that inevitably accompany the trend towards a lower profit rate, alternating periods of crisis and expansion and the existence of the famous 'reserve army' of proletarians. Historical determinism and the philosophy of history come together in a positivist approach in which history serves less to question than to validate a general scheme.

Yet, as was the case for the Enlightenment, Marx also sometimes produced new attitudes when he moved beyond Germany or Britain. It is important to understand, even beyond an author's initial intention, the role cross-cultural influences played (and play) in comparative historical investigation. Thus, the opposition between Slavophiles and Westernisers in nineteenth-century Russia stemmed precisely from the issue that concerns us here: comparison in its epistemological and historical dimensions. Starting in the 1840s, first Slavophiles and then Westernisers such as Alexander Herzen saw the Russian peasant commune as a historical singularity that could allow the country to move directly into modernity without going through a capitalist phase of development. The debate over the commune was inseparable from the comparison between Russia and Western Europe. This debate was at once ideological (the role of the peasantry in the revolution), empirical (how to prove the arguments used) and methodological (how to make comparisons). That is why this debate inevitably ended up being combined with the debate over method in the science of society. Marx did it, and Russian intellectuals did it as well. 'Those who invoke private property', noted Nikolay Gavrilovich Chernyshevsky, 'think that progress in sociology and economics, as in natural science, consists in moving from simple to more complex forms'. From this point of view, by limiting specialisation, the

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commune did not contribute to backwardness but rather anticipated the future evolution of the developed countries.[25]

But how were these conclusions to be reconciled with the Marxist thought with which these authors associated themselves? In other words, if historical laws existed, how could historical varieties be explained? One single path for each country, or multiple paths? The answer to these questions had an impact on the theory and practice of comparison itself: it offered a choice between normative comparison and historical determinism, on the one hand, and heuristic comparison and historical bifurcations, on the other. How so?

In a letter addressed to Nikolay Konstantinovich Mikhailovsky in 1877, Marx said he thought Russia could take a different route from the one in the West. Four years later, in a letter to Vera Zasulich, he wrote that the peasant commune was the basis for the social regeneration of Russia.[26] By turning his focus towards Russia and empirically casting doubt on his theory, Marx ended up unlocking it. Yet Marx was uncertain in this turn, and after him Engels pushed to standardise Marxism into a kind of orthodoxy which ignored the 'alternative paths' in history. This type of normative comparison has never disappeared from Marxist thought in all its variants; even worse, 'late Marx' seems even to have been forgotten again, after the parenthesis of 'development studies' during the Cold War. Would Max Weber and his followers provide an alternative?

The Use and Misuse of Max Weber

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, reflections on comparison took some new turns. First, the general social and political context focused attention on countries that were 'catching up' (such as Germany and the United States), inspiring new reflections on the putative 'decadence' of former leading countries, such as China or even, paradoxically, Britain. Meanwhile, the emergence of Japan encouraged comparative reflections on non-European areas and their presumed 'backwardness'. Modernisation and the role of the state therefore acquired a major relevance in comparative investigations in history. Beyond this field, anthropology found new life in global investigations of 'local' people. In this context, physical and biological anthropology made use of natural sciences to classify and hierarchise peoples, while ethnography and

[25] Nikolai G. Chernyshevskii, *'Ob Obshchinnom vladenii'* [On Community Ownership] 1858, reproduced in *Sochineniia* [Works], vol. 2 (Geneva: Elpidine, 1879). Regarding these debates: Alessandro Stanziani, *L'économie en revolution: le cas russe. 1870–1930* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1998).

[26] Stanziani, *L'économie en révolution.* For the letters between Marx and the Russians: Teodor Shanin (ed.), *Late Marx and the Russian Road: Marx and the 'Peripheries of Capitalism'* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983).

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cultural anthropology sought to compare by putting the accent on 'cultural specificities', and, eventually, comparative linguistics.[27] I will return to anthropology in the final part of this chapter.

Among the authors who contributed most to reflections on comparisons in this period, one reference is at least as important as Marx: Max Weber. He had enormous influence at the time and his ideas keep surfacing today in comparative and global history studies, via Charles Tilly, R. Bin Wong and Kenneth Pomeranz, among others – this despite criticism of Weber by specialists in area studies and anthropologists such as Jack Goody.[28] We should be careful to distinguish Weber's thought from the many approaches more or less inspired by him. Let us take one example among others: religion. Serious proof has never been found to substantiate the favourable connection between Protestantism and capitalism, or the tensions between Catholicism and Confucianism on the one hand, and capitalism on the other. Yet these elements continue to be evoked as if they were established truths – except when they are reversed entirely nowadays and Confucianism is invoked to explain China's economic success.[29]

Weber certainly had a Eurocentric approach, as did Marx before him. At the same time, when he wrote on China or India and compared them to Europe in terms of rationality, state, the economy, accounting and science, he posed a far greater challenge to his period and was much more nuanced than his critics usually argued. His main goal was not to oppose civilisation to backwardness and rationality to irrationality but to explain historical trajectories starting from social complexities. To be sure, Weber sought to explain the success of the West; but, at the same time, his explanations were far more complex than those of dozens of authors who claimed to be inspired by Weber. Much recent criticism of Weber applies more to 'Weberian authors' than to Weber himself.[30]

Unlike Karl Marx or Émile Durkheim, Weber gave priority to comparison rather than to 'whole' dynamics (without neglecting them). This style of reasoning had its roots in the German 'historical school' of economics and in the attempt to insert the 'nation' into wider dynamics while preserving it as one possible unit of comparison. However, unlike the first generation of the historical school (Friedrich List, for example), looking for the 'nation' in a still divided Germany, and unlike the second generation (Wilhelm Roscher, among others), reflecting on the tension between casuistic and general historical laws,

[27] Matei Candea, *Comparison in Anthropology: The Impossible Method* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

[28] Jack Goody, *The East in the West* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Haupt and Kocka, *Comparative and Transnational History*; Wong, *China Transformed*.

[29] Jan Rehmann, *Max Weber: Modernization as Passive Revolution: A Gramscian Analysis* (Leiden: Brill, 2013); Peter Ghosh, *Max Weber and the Protestant Ethic: Twin Histories* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

[30] James M. Blaut, *Eight Eurocentric Historians* (New York: Guilford Publications, 2000).

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Weber pioneered a multi-scale and multi-angle comparative method. The crucial element in this process lay in the choice of the fields, on the one hand, and the variables, on the other. First, the fields: society, religion and the economy. All three enter into Weberian architecture to provide a fully integrated analysis of society. Next, within each field, Weber selected what he considered the relevant variables. For example, the comparison between Europe – mainly Britain – and China was made by focusing on private property or the role played by science in technological innovation, power struggles between entrepreneurs, capitalists and wage earners and so on. Capitalism was distinguished by the pursuit of profit and the rational organisation of production factors.[31] Weber's strength lay in conceiving a framework of comparative analysis that remained unchallenged for decades and which often served to legitimise the supremacy of the West, or, rather, of its ideal type.[32] He shared with Marx the idea that profits and wage labour were the main features of capitalism. However, unlike Marx he did not seek to predict the course of history: normativity made way for a heuristic of the 'model' that aimed at opening doors and asking questions rather than identifying the 'laws of history'. The global perspective was equally different: Marx reasoned in terms of extension; he presumed that the historical path of England, more or less idealised, would extend to the rest of the world. Weber did not imagine the future of other countries but instead sought to compare ideal types with empirical realities. He thus did not share Marx's obligation to consider the case of India or Russia and ask if they fitted into his scheme.

What is important to retain here is the relationship Weber maintained between comparison and ideal types.[33] This link was crucial to incorporating historical analysis into a sociological perspective. Comparison requires constant terms; without them, it becomes impossible. According to Weber, this was the price to pay for reconciling logical rigour with empirical analysis. Not all these features would be taken up by Weber's disciples.

Comparative history as it developed after the Second World War would have been impossible without the intellectual diaspora of Russian and Central European authors in the United States, originating from the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian and Russian empires as well as the rise of Nazism. Friedrich A. von Hayek, Ludwig von Mises, Karl Polanyi, Alexander Gerschenkron,

[31] Max Weber, *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1922); translated as Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, ed. Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich, 2 vols. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978). The *Max-Weber-Gesamtausgabe* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck) has re-edited the work in eight volumes: I/22,1 to I/22,5, I/23 to I/25 (1999–2015).

[32] Wolfgang J. Mommsen, *Max Weber and German Politics, 1890–1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).

[33] Fritz K. Ringer, *Max Weber's Methodology: The Unification of the Cultural and Social Sciences* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997).

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Wassily Leontief, Albert Hirschmann and Simon Kuznets were just some of those who left continental Europe. Their sensibility and approaches owed much to the multiple encounters between the Germanic and Russian cultures, to which they added an always difficult dialogue with the Anglophone worlds (most of them were critical of American consumerism).[34] These experiences encouraged not just comparisons in their approach but, what is more, comparisons in which cross-cultural experiences were crucial.

To these multiple influences another must be added: the global Cold War, in which tensions between the two superpowers were transmuted into investigations (and subsequent policies) about the origins and solutions to 'backwardness'. Alexander Gerschenkron is famous for his *Economic Backwardness in Historical Perspective*. It involved proposing a scale of comparison to account for economic growth as well as for so-called 'obstruction' factors. Like Max Weber and others before him, Gerschenkron began by drawing up a list of Western characteristics on which his comparison would be based. He, too, emphasised cities, the bourgeoisie, markets and private property. Yet unlike Marx and, to some extent, Weber, he thought it was possible to arrive at industrialisation (but not capitalism) without a bourgeoisie. In other words, Gerschenkron gave new value to the late Marx's investigation on the Russian path. He did not use it to explain the general laws of history, but instead to identify historical and future solutions to 'underdevelopment'. 'Backward' countries (to use the jargon of the 1960s and 1970s) such as Prussia and Russia had 'substituting factors', notably the state. This was a clever solution to the problem raised by the need to reconcile particular features and historical specificities with general dynamics. If backwardness and diversity go together, then it is possible to conceive of alternative paths.[35]

One might wonder, however, whether this solution really eliminates the confusion between historical time and logical time. Yet these two terms – the notions of backwardness and historical temporalities – are hardly compatible. In reality, economic backwardness refers to logical time (as identified in an economic model, for instance). Contrary to appearances, Gerschenkron did not compare Russia to England in specific historical contexts. Instead, he opposed an ideal image of the West (and of England in particular) to an equally ideal image of nineteenth-century Russia. English economic development was associated with the early introduction of a parliament, privatisation of the commons and, hence, the formation of a proletariat available for agriculture and industry.

[34] See, for example, Nicholas Dawidoff, *The Fly Swatter: Portrait of an Exceptional Character* (New York: Vintage Books, 2002), a biography of Alexander Gerschenkron; Jeremy Adelman, *Worldly Philosopher: The Odyssey of Albert O. Hirschman* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013).

[35] Alexander Gerschenkron, *Economic Backwardness in Historical Perspective* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1962).

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In contrast, Russia was associated with market towns – and therefore with a bourgeoisie – as well as the presence of an absentee landed gentry living off serf labour. These were ideal types instead of complex historical realities. This approach paid a heavy tribute to the climate of the Cold War.

Normative Comparison: From the Cold War to the Great Divergence

This work was part of a broader debate in the 1950s and 1960s. With decolonisation, economists raised the problem of (under)development and what should be done to remedy it. In the context of the Cold War, this issue was inseparable from the question of which economic and political form the new states would take: capitalism or socialism. The components of this debate were globalised. They not only compared the economic achievements of the USSR to those of the West, but also the trajectories of China, India and the countries in the Americas, Africa and Asia that were gaining their independence at the time. In fact, the debate over modernisation implied a strongly determinist philosophy of history, Eurocentric categories and postulates and, ultimately, circular explanatory arguments.[36] Herein lies the essential connection between Weber, Gerschenkron and development economics: Eurocentrism was the very basis of comparisons using ideal types. These comparisons, often centred on the twin notions of backwardness and progress, reflected issues that were not only intellectual but also political and therefore normative. The comparisons were not so much anachronistic as atemporal.

The normativity of comparison even increased over time, well beyond Gerschenkron's approach. In particular, Walt W. Rostow put forward his theory of stages of growth in open opposition to socialism. He showed that the stages of growth were universal and that it was impossible to follow a path imposed from on high, as in the USSR. History served to validate the Western-style itinerary and the arrow of time moved in only one direction. Paradoxically, Rostow reproduced Marx's argument, according to which the most advanced countries showed backward countries the way ahead.

In a similar vein, when Karl August Wittfogel published *Oriental Despotism*, the Cold War was at its height.[37] Using his Marxist training and Marx's notion of the 'Asiatic mode of production', the author described the USSR under Stalin as 'despotism'. From this viewpoint, he was putting the Soviet Union in the same category as earlier forms of Asian power that were said to have developed highly despotic societies by controlling hydraulic

[36] Frederick Cooper et al., *Confronting Historical Paradigms: Peasants, Labor, and the Capitalist World System in Africa and Latin America* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1993).
[37] Karl A. Wittfogel, *Oriental Despotism. A Comparative Study of Total Power* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957).

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resources. Wittfogel contrasted this type of organisation with slave-owning societies and feudal societies. Instead of slaves or serfs, oriental despotic societies subjugated the entire population to the will of high-ranking bureaucrats. What was really at stake in Wittfogel's book was this: at the time of the Cold War, the USSR was viewed as a despotic system not only by liberals and conservatives but also by socialists and communists critical of Stalinism and the Soviet Union. For Wittfogel, as for Montesquieu and Marx before him, the analysis of Asia was actually intended as a discussion of political relationships within the 'West'. In other words, we should not make the mistake of considering every opposition between 'us' and the 'others' as lacking tensions within the 'us'.

There is another methodological insight to discuss in this kind of comparison: the relationship between causality and temporality. For example, comparative history and the sociology of state construction (at the very core of Max Weber, Charles Tilly, Theda Skopcol, Barrington Moore and Victor B. Lieberman) have often taught us to think in terms of nation-states. Even if an author such as Charles Tilly declares at the outset that we must avoid projecting recent constructions on the past, he cannot help doing so himself.[38] That is one of the consequences of studying the past in order to find the origins of the present. This reasoning raises two types of questions: it starts from the results and assumes the chronological antecedents were 'causes', even though there is no evidence, for example, that the growth of England was actually linked to the adoption of the Bill of Rights in 1689 or that Venice lost its power because it was unable to produce a state like France. In the absence of empirical materials, the authors added a causality which is impossible to demonstrate. The solution lies very conveniently in *post hoc ergo propter hoc*. Temporal succession becomes synonymous with causality. Is it possible to shatter this kind of tautological reasoning?

A first attempt to solve this problem comes from the so-called debate on 'the Great Divergence', inspired by the title of Kenneth Pomeranz's book. In Pomeranz's approach, the Great Divergence is mainly related to colonial expansion and factor endowments. While Western Europe benefitted from its American colonies, and later from American markets and resources, Russian despotism and power limited Asian (mainly Chinese) expansion. We are apparently at the other end of the spectrum from classical Weberian approaches: instead of trying to fit the data into a model, here the data are used to confirm or disprove earlier studies without any pre-judgement. To be sure, these approaches do not fall into the trap of facile comparison mentioned earlier. They also avoid celebrating the West and, like every other global history

[38] Charles Tilly, *Coercion, Capital and European States, AD 990–1991* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1990).

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approach, those used by proponents of the Great Divergence also propose important solutions to the question of how the singularities of the various parts of the world are interlinked and how they are connected to a larger whole (e.g. the comparison between the Lower Yangzi region and Lancashire leads to a reassessment of European and Chinese dynamics as a whole). This was a huge step forward from previous comparisons in terms of backwardness. But what about the model itself?

Pomeranz explains the Chinese dynamic according to the same criteria used for Europe – in particular, demographic growth, the protection of private property and the commercial and proto-industrial dynamic.[39] In other words, like Weber, David S. Landes, Karl Polanyi, Marx and so many others before him, Pomeranz retains the idealised British model made of privatisation of common lands, proletarianisation, industrialisation, bourgeois and individualist mentality, and so forth, and then extends it to China. Thus, Pomeranz overturns Weber but maintains his comparative method – which confirms the strength and polyvalence of the Weberian approach. At the same time, from a political standpoint, the whole debate over the Great Divergence stems from neoliberal Western intellectual orthodoxy after the fall of the Berlin Wall: markets and capitalism dominate the recent centuries of world history; institutions and perhaps factor endowments influence historical outcomes, not 'mentalities' or different economic attitudes (as anthropologists had expressed them). Finally, research work on the Great Divergence is problematic from the standpoint of political philosophy: how long will economic history – whether global or not – have to focus exclusively on growth and on 'who was first'? The history of Russia – as well as the new Asian capitalism of China and India today – show that economic growth and markets are perfectly compatible with a lack of democracy and unequal social rights.

Marc Bloch or How to Reconcile Philology and Comparison

The First World War was experienced everywhere as a fundamental shift that broke up the old order. The United States asserted itself as the leading global power, while France and Great Britain, despite victory, were left to cope with the difficulties of reconstruction. Hostility to global economic, political and social dynamics stoked populist nationalism in Europe, Asia and parts of Africa and the Americas.[40] During the interwar period, historiographical nationalism reached heights never before achieved, even in the nineteenth century.[41] The

[39] Pomeranz, *Great Divergence*.
[40] Stefan Berger et al. (eds.), *Narrating the Nation: Representations in History, Media and the Arts* (New York: Berghahn, 2008).
[41] Katherine Verdery and Ivo Banac (eds.), *National Character and National Ideology in Interwar Eastern Europe* (New Haven: Yale Center for International and Area Studies, 1995).

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political role of nationalist history found its most extreme embodiment in the totalitarian states, where Hitler, Mussolini and Stalin made the rewriting of history the core of their respective political projects. Now nation and ethnicity became strongly connected and social Darwinism penetrated historical discourse.[42] In 1920, Lucien Febvre published an article in the *Revue de synthèse historique* setting forth the political and social role of history in a 'world in ruins'.[43] Febvre was not looking for a theory, but rather for an approach to history that would explain, among other things, the World War and its origins. This is where the global nature of history comes in: a global perspective is not as important in developing a political project for society (as was the case for Marx and Oswald Spengler, among many others) as it is in connecting different levels of history. Global history was *histoire totale*. Febvre emphasised that 'posing problems correctly – the *how* and *why* –expressed the end and means of history. When there are no problems, there is no history – only narratives and compilations.'[44] The other issue pertained to the use of language in analysing societies distant from the historian in time or space. Febvre noted that mastering the language used is an absolute prerequisite to undertaking a historical study.

Marc Bloch also insisted on linguistic proficiency in his *Apologie pour l'histoire ou Métier d'historien* (1949) and in his famous article on historical comparison from 1928.[45] It is not by chance that, even nowadays and not only in France, historians who criticise comparativism and 'socio-history' refer to Bloch as one of the few acceptable methods for comparison. What essentially distinguishes Bloch and Febvre from Weber and his followers is mastery of languages and a rejection of general abstract models of analysis. Febvre maintained that researchers should not undertake analyses of a region unless they were proficient in the language; Bloch demanded similar linguistic proficiency. His approach shows the distance that separates him from Max Weber, Émile Durkheim and Francois Simiand.[46] Bloch thought categories evolved over time, which accounts for his scepticism with regard to diachronic

[42] Anthony D. Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986).

[43] Lucien Febvre, 'L'histoire dans le monde en ruines', *Revue de synthèse historique* 30, 1 (1920), 1–15.

[44] Lucien Febvre, 'Propos d'initiation: Vivre l'histoire', in Lucien Febvre, *Combats pour l'histoire* (Paris: Colin, 1992), 18–33.

[45] Marc Bloch, *Apologie pour l`histoire, ou Métier d`historien*, ed. Étienne Bloch (Paris: Armand Colin, 1993) [English translation: Bloch, *The Historian's Craft* (New York: Knopf, 1953)]; Marc Bloch, 'Pour une histoire comparée des sociétés européennes', *Revue de synthèse historique* 46, 1 (1928), 15–50; Marc Bloch, 'A Contribution towards a Comparative History of European Societies', in *Land and Work in Mediaeval Europe. Selected Papers*, trans J. E. Anderson (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966), 44–81.

[46] Etienne Anheim and Benoit Grévin, 'Choc des civilisations ou choc des disciplines? Les sciences sociales et le comparatisme', *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine* 49, 4 (2002), 122–46.

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comparisons and his preference for synchronic comparisons. Moreover, in keeping with his insistence on knowing the sources and the language, Bloch restricted himself to comparisons within the 'Western' and Germanic European context and excluded Russia from his investigation. According to him, this was not only because he did not know Russian, but also because Russia did not belong to the same civilisation as France and Germany and therefore comparison would be useless.[47] Bloch's approach invites us to think about relevant scales for comparison: even admitting for the moment that only synchronic comparison is justified, how does one go about choosing the relative spaces?

Bloch took for granted the relevance of comparisons within Europe. Of all his positions, this is perhaps the one that was most influenced by the interwar context; the tensions within European space motivated Bloch's desire to claim its homogeneity despite the First World War and the conflict between France and Germany. These were indeed major challenges, especially when viewed from Strasbourg where Bloch lived. As a result, contrary to his own method, he assumed far more than he demonstrated the homogeneity of Europe and its relevance to making suitable comparisons. Despite the general success of this approach over decades, he was confusing the historian's skills with analytical relevance. No doubt within the community of historians, as it was understood in France and in Europe and which Bloch defended in his work, the knowledge of languages was assumed to be indispensable for studying a region and producing comparisons and/or circulatory analyses. The refusal to make comparisons for reasons of 'language' or 'civilisation' is just as weak as making comparisons based on generalist models. This actually was a first important departure from the Enlightenment priority accorded to the 'model' or general concepts over empirical findings and which was inherited, in different ways, by Marx and Weber. The strength of this approach is to return sources, languages and archives to the core of the comparative investigation. The price paid was a methodological underdetermination of the epistemological status of the origin of archives themselves, the selection of documents by the historians and the role of language across time and space, as we have shown in Bloch's definition of 'Europe'. Anthropology provides a possible solution to this problem.

Anthropology and Comparisons: A Dialogue with Historians and Economists?

To a certain extent, anthropology is always comparative, although not necessarily explicitly so.[48] Some major anthropologists, Evans-Pritchard among them, even argued the impossibility of achieving ultimate comparisons in

[47] Bloch, 'Pour une histoire comparée des sociétés européennes'.
[48] Candea, *Comparison in Anthropology.*

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anthropology; in doing so, they developed wonderful analyses on comparison itself.[49] In fact, 'biological' and nowadays 'evolutionary' anthropology insist on comparison as a natural artefact of the human mind, while, at the opposite end, cultural anthropology stresses the limits of comparison and its artificial nature. The former approach made use of the inductive method of the natural sciences when comparing and emphasised the differences, 'all other things being equal'. This branch of anthropology was and still is close to economics, which adopted a similar method. By contrast, the latter approach sustained the so-called concomitant variations when comparing cases – that is, a complex set of multiple variations within and between the compared items. Anthropology offered a further device: it deconstructed the binary of 'us' and the 'other' so widespread in historical studies, in particular in imperial, colonial and postcolonial investigations. This approach overcame the notion of 'specificity' and therefore put an end to the comparison, if not the opposition, between essentialised 'cultures' and 'area studies'.

Instead, circulation and translations became part of the comparison itself. Comparison was no longer a tool to confirm a given model but, on the contrary, an attitude to negotiate in situ the tensions between the 'universal' and the 'particular' while stressing the multiplicity of historical paths.[50] By subjecting the very notion of 'culture' to scrutiny, anthropology pushed historians to redefine their reasoning in terms of well identified 'cultures' or 'civilisations'. No 'culture' is isolated from all others, and its representations and self-representations go well beyond the conventional opposition between 'realities' and 'representations', so dear to economic and some social historians. It is not by chance that anthropologists are usually critical of the very notion of 'area studies', as ahistorical, essentialist stabilisation of cultural identities.[51] However, such a radical relativism and indistinction of the subject and the object, as embraced by Clifford Geertz and his followers, does not find unanimous consensus among anthropologists and historians.[52] Among historians, the interface between post-modernist and post-colonialist deconstructivism and new reflective, critical reconstructions of the past has generated a multitude of approaches, including Carlo Ginzburg's historical

[49] Edward E. Evans-Pritchard, *Social Anthropology* (London: Cohen & West, 1951).

[50] Jane Comaroff and John Comaroff (eds.), *Millennial Capitalism and the Culture of Neoliberalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001); Arturo Escobar, *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).

[51] Jane Guyer, 'Anthropology in Area Studies', *Annual Review of Anthropology* 33 (2004), 499–523; Philippe Descola, *Par-delà nature et culture* (Paris: Gallimard, 2005) [English translation: *Beyond Nature and Culture*, trans. Janet Lloyd (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013)]; Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*.

[52] Comaroff and Comaroff, *Millennial Capitalism*; Marshall Sahlins, *Stone Age Economics* (Chicago: Aldine de Gruyter, 1972); George Steinmetz (ed.), *The Politics of Methods in the Human Sciences* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005).

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morphologies, Ann Laura Stoler's ethnography in and of the archives, and Natalie Zemon Davis's and Alf Luedtke's historical anthropology, to name a few.[53]

Meanwhile, from the early twentieth century, economic anthropology sought to articulate a different (from mainstream economics) relationship with history and other social sciences.[54] Hundreds of anthropological historical studies on local communities and their 'economic' behaviour all around the world saw the light of day. Intense debates over 'multiple economic rationalities', and the denial of supposedly economic relationships existing independently from cultural and social features, marked this huge trend during much of the twentieth century.[55] In the second half of the century, these were not just theoretical debates: concrete policies to be adopted in 'developing countries' were a major stake. Did 'Africans' or 'Indians' have to act like Londoners at the stock exchange to escape from poverty? The most interesting concern was that this attitude ultimately raised questions about economic behaviour and the boundaries between economic, social and cultural life in 'advanced' countries themselves. According to many anthropologists, optimising agents, as mainstream economics called them, were a fiction everywhere.[56] In short, the supposedly 'local' was not only connected to other 'local' entities and therefore to the global, but required that theories and interpretations of the 'West' itself be reframed. Historians, above all those who were close to microhistory, seemed extremely sensitive to this argument.[57] It is from this crossroads between history, anthropology and other social sciences that we may reflect on the present state and future orientation of comparative history.

[53] Carlo Ginzburg, *Clues, Myths and the Historical Method* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989); Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain*; Natalie Zemon Davis, *Fiction in the Archives* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990); Alf Luedtke, *History of Everyday Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).

[54] Raymond Firth, *Primitive Economics of the New Zealand Maori* (London: Routledge, 1929); Edward E. Evans-Pritchard, *The Nuer: A Description of the Modes of Livelihood and Political Institutions of a Nilotic People* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1940); Marcel Mauss, *Essai sur le don* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2012).

[55] For a synthesis see Chris Hann and Keith Hart, *Economic Anthropology* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011).

[56] Arjun Appadurai (ed.), *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986); Clifford Geertz et al., *Meaning and Order in Moroccan Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979); David Graeber, *Toward an Anthropological Theory of Value: The False Coin of Our Own Dreams* (New York: Palgrave, 2001); Maurice Godelier, *Rationalité et irrationalité en économie* (Paris: Maspero, 1968); Claude Meillassoux, *L'anthropologie économique des Gouro de Côte d'Ivoire* (Paris: Mouton, 1964).

[57] Giovanni Levi, *Le pouvoir au village: Histoire d'un exorciste dans le Piémont du xvii^e siècle* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989).

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Which Way?

The question this chapter sought to raise is not just how and whether historians should practise comparison but also, and more importantly, why historical comparisons matter in the political arena. In the eighteenth century, comparison was grounded in philosophy and expressed the deep involvement of 'philosophers' in the public sphere. To a certain extent, comparative history was part of political philosophy, which explains the criticisms most 'philosophers' raised vis-à-vis philology as a purely descriptive tool for 'antiquarians'. At the same time, it would be a mistake to associate this comparative philosophical history with Eurocentrism. This was true for some but not all authors, precisely because the Enlightenment expressed contrasting attitudes towards the 'centrality' of Europe, its notions and the idea of progress.

The nineteenth century took a different approach. According to Marx, progress must come from the most advanced countries, above all Britain, and the categories of capital, labour, capitalism, exploitation and accumulation, although derived from a more or less stylised 'European' (actually British–German) perception, were supposed to be universally acceptable. Comparison was absorbed into the general laws of history.

Socio-economic comparative history acquired increasing importance in the public sphere during the twentieth century, precisely in relation to global phenomena such as the transmutation of Europe and increasing nationalist movements in the colonial world during and after decolonisation. Max Weber and his legacy were at the very core of comparative history for many decades. As such, Weber's studies could lead to Eurocentric attitudes (in particular, on China or the role of Protestantism), but also to their opposite (studies on law and authority, parts of his economic history). As for Marc Bloch and the *Annales* school, multiple epistemological options and empirical conclusions were available.

This was not the case after Bloch for multiple reasons: the emergence of totalitarianisms and their use of history produced more rigid and tautological attitudes in liberal history as well. The Cold War and decolonisation exacerbated the problem rather than solving it, as we have seen with the debates around Alexander Gerschenkron, despite his attempts to identify multiple paths of development. Ironically, the end of the Cold War had an unexpected effect on comparative history: at first, renewed enthusiasm for the global gave rise to new ventures in comparative history, as attested by the debate on the Great Divergence. This debate marked the end of economic anthropology and of multiple paths to 'modernity'. Comparison became a politically correct tool to confirm that Africans, Chinese and Indians were equally keen to embrace capitalism if only they had not been invaded by Western powers and later lived with corrupt governments. With the financial crisis, the opposition to

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globalisation and the new rise of nationalism, comparative approaches met with success among nationalist and civilisationist historians and observers, who stressed the radical opposition between Europe and Islam, the United States and the others, India or China and the West, and the like.

Is there another way to make use of comparison in the era of the global return of nationalisms? The answer is yes, but we need first to overcome some limitations in history teaching and history writing, beginning with the persistent institutional and analytic accent put on the so-called 'singularity' or 'specificity' of area studies.[58] Several authors have reflected on comparison and expressed similar methodologies, some looking for 'universal values', others associating the very notion of 'specificity' with persistent longue durée features, in culture, institutions and the like. 'Specificity', the very core of comparison, was identified in the 'soul' of the country, its traditions, customs and sometimes language and religious beliefs – we would say its structural longue durée components. Specificity is a structuralist notion today and was so in the past. Area studies still mention undefined 'specificities' of an area as synonymous with incommensurability and incomparability.[59]

Sometimes, singularity is translated into uniqueness: a given region is said to be sui generis and therefore incomparable because unlike any other. Any justification of this position would require an explicit comparison, whereas this practice is rejected in the name of the very specificity and uniqueness of one area or another.[60] Together with its opposite – universalism and a single time scale – this was the most important legacy the Enlightenment left to historical comparisons. Such 'singularity' is also associated with the longue durée; persistent features may account for the presumed singularity of an area: its environment, culture, language, religion and state.[61] In defining civilisations and area studies, the longue durée approach turns into a boomerang: what began as a heuristic tool (how to justify Europe instead of the Mediterranean? China instead of the Han culture?) becomes an intellectual prison.[62]

Nor can reciprocal comparison solve the problem, despite Austin's and Pomeranz's assertions to the contrary. The answer is not to claim that all areas are equal, but to critically identify their multiple and variable (in time) singularities. These can only be detected in a connected history of the notions and practices of 'singularities' themselves. It does not suffice to say that France

[58] Robert H. Bates, 'Area Studies and the Discipline: A Useful Controversy?' *PS: Political Science & Politics* 30, 2 (1997), 166–70.
[59] David Ludden, 'Area Studies in the Age of Globalization', *FRONTIERS: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad* 6, 1 (2000), 1–22.
[60] Werner and Zimmermann, *De la comparaison à l'histoire croisée*.
[61] Marc Raeff, 'Un Empire comme les autres?', *Cahiers du monde russe* 30, 4 (1989), 321–7.
[62] For a critique of these approaches, see Sanjay Subrahmanyam, 'Connected Histories: Notes Towards a Reconfiguration of Early Modern Eurasia', *Modern Asian Studies* 31, 3 (1997), 735–62.

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is like or unlike Senegal and Japan; presumed 'specificities' must be examined and not assumed; they have to be put into a dynamic historical global framework in which connections and comparison intervene. Areas are not monolithic entities existing by themselves but mobile configurations which respond to both sources and questions.

At the same time, as the history of comparison shows, a second shift is needed in contemporary historical practices. Schemes underlying historical comparative investigations are, explicitly or not, drawn from social sciences; they need to be historically decentred. What does this mean? To this day, global history reproduces the different paths to comparison inherited from previous centuries: neo-Marxists such as Immanuel Wallerstein or Giovanni Arrighi compare in order to identify a single path to post-capitalism. The world-system is a tautological model which leaves no room for historical bifurcations: the scene was set in the sixteenth century and ever since the periphery has been condemned to be a periphery and the core to be a core. Recent BRIC paths invalidate this theory. Paradoxically, globality is found again in a universal path, or even in a universal, pre-existing form of economic rationality. It is not by chance that some variants of the Great Divergence thesis combine Wallersteinian and neo-Marxist approaches: profit maximisation, exploitation and domination explain the 'divergence'.

The problem is that historical comparison is based on 'schemes', if not rigid 'models', derived from philosophy, political economy, sociology, political sciences and anthropology. Comparisons are therefore often tautological because most of the social sciences are not only Eurocentric but also normative fields: they not only ask questions, they also pretend to give answers which fit the model and, where possible, they aim at predicting the future (economics constantly does so) while providing suggestions to the public sphere. Once the social sciences become normative, their use of history produces tautological schemes. And when normativity is combined with Eurocentric (and, recently, Sinocentric, Indocentric and Afrocentric) values and categories, then we are locked in historical 'centric' determinism and comparison is bound to fail.

However, there is no need to fall into this trap and we can still make comparisons which are neither deterministic nor 'centric'. These two moves are interrelated. On the one hand, schemes may provide a heuristic, helping to pose questions instead of providing ready answers. If the answers do not fit the model, in particular in history, this means that historical research has genuinely contributed to our understanding of the world. This is the first contribution global history can make to the social sciences through comparatism: it can transform the normative into the heuristic.

On the other hand, much more than history, the social sciences are extremely 'centric' (in this case, mostly Eurocentric), even if nowadays attempts are made to decentralise the social sciences by basing them on presumed 'Chinese',

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'Islamic', 'African' or 'Indian' categories. Thus, global historians must dare not just to 'historicise' the social sciences (as Marx, Weber and many others already argued), but to historicise them into a global perspective. Despite some recent attempts, a 'global history' of political economy, sociology, anthropology, linguistics, legal studies and so forth, that is not conceived as a series of chapters on, say, economics in India, in Japan, African sociology and the like, has yet to be written. In short, problematising the so-called 'specificity' of an area instead of taking it for granted, while mobilising the decentred social sciences, is the main goal of a heuristic and not normative comparatism in global history.

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