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### **Comparing societies or unfolding entanglements? International Conference on Comparative History at the Central European University (Budapest)**

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*Pasts, Inc. Center for Historical Studies* was established in April 2002 as the core of an international, interdisciplinary, and intercultural network of scholars based on the Central European University in Budapest. This organisation cooperates with CEU's Department of History and other units, such as the Humanities Center and the Center for Arts and Culture. Besides publications, the *Center* organises lectures, international workshops as well as conferences and its projects cover a wide thematic range: history of empires; symbolic geographies; theory of historical studies; social history; cultural history; history of ideas; and historical aspects of religion and literature.

The *Center* focuses on the study of East Central European History within European and global perspectives which by itself requires the method of the comparative approach. Since comparative historical research of this region is relatively neglected in relation to Western Europe, a new initiative, the Comparative History Project, was launched by the *Center* to promote this research. The primary aim of the project that might be considered a unique initiative in Hungary and the region is to acquaint the participating scholars with the theoretical as well as practical problems, questions, and especially results of international comparisons. Furthermore, the project wishes to urge the participants to a more active discourse, thus, reconsidering the methods, theories, and concepts of comparative studies.

The first step in this direction was an international conference, entitled, "Comparative History in/on Europe – The State of the Art", organised in Budapest 9-11 November, 2006. Discussing the state of this discipline and method implies serious considerations of its validity. The important aspects of 20th century European history, such as European integration, the extension of international trade, internationalisation, and globalization

serve as a means of research and it is indispensable to carry out analyses within the realm of comparative approaches. In spite of these modern challenges, comparative perspective should be by no means regarded as a new development, since it reaches back to the 1920s. Similarly to sociology and other related social sciences and in interaction with them, comparative historical method represents a systematic and explicit approach, which uses well-established and clear-cut notions. It compares two or more past societies concentrating on their analogous as well as different properties. The systematic and explicit study describes and analyses the similarities and differences of the elements of comparison, and parallel to this it creates hypotheses, at the same time, while testing their validity.<sup>1</sup>

However, the application of comparison raises severe methodological and even philosophical questions which were partly discussed in the course of the conference. Lectures were grouped in the following sections: theories and practices of comparative history, also expanding the limits of comparison; towards a comparative history of Europe; empires and European regions in comparison. Each section was concluded by a discussion. Although the limits of this report does not allow an overall examination of the lectures, still I endeavour to introduce the questions most relevant to the present state of comparative historical research.

The conference laid considerable stress on dealing with epistemological and methodological questions, as other branches of historical studies bitingly criticised the comparative perspective in the latest years. Since almost all of the lectures tended to find a critical answer to this challenge, there was no real difference in their theoretical stand. Jürgen Kocka (*Comparative History and its Enemies*) gave a relatively narrow definition of comparisons: “discuss two or more historical phenomena with similarities and dissimilarities to better understand”. In this context he differentiated between four functions which might overlap. *Heuristic*: identify questions and problems that were neglected or missed; *descriptive*: profile of cases with contrasting and elaborating, first characterisations of phenomena and claims on particularity as well; *analytic*: causal (why) questions; *paradigmatic*: distance from the best known case, deprovincialising, also exercising an opening effect with consequences on the style and profession of the historian. He especially drew attention to the fact that the units of comparison must be separated from each other analytically, and clear-cut notions must be applied.

In accordance with the title of his lecture, Kocka’s theoretical principle can be regarded as a way of legitimization as opposed to the „enemies” of the comparative perspective.

1 For methodological issues of historical comparisons see H. Kaelble, *Der historische Vergleich*. Frankfurt a. M./New York 1999; H.-G. Haupt/J. Kocka (Hrsg.): *Geschichte und Vergleich*. Frankfurt a. M./New York 1996; H.-G. Haupt, *Comparative History*, in: N. J. Smelser/P. Baltes (eds.): *International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences*, Amsterdam etc. 2001, vol. 4, p. 2397-2403; C. Lorenz, *Konstruktion der Vergangenheit: Eine Einführung in die Geschichtstheorie*, Köln 1997. For the method of comparative history in Hungary M. Keller, *A megértés lehetősége – az összehasonlító történetírás hasznáról*, in: *Aetas*, 20. évf. 2005. 4. sz. 102-111; B. Tomka, *Az összehasonlító módszertan a történetírásban – eredmények és kihasználatlan lehetőségek*, in: *Aetas*, 20. évf. 2005. 1-2. sz. 243-258.

One of the most essential aspects of the conference was the occasionally sharp critical attitude towards the “enemies” which was a possible reflection to the challenges pertaining to comparisons. In my opinion, the substance of the comparative method unfolds in Kocka’s answer. Well, who are the “enemies”? On the one hand, entangled history (entanglement, Verflechtungsgeschichte, histoire croisée), on the other hand, transnational history. In relation to this, Michael Werner’s scholarly activities have to be mentioned who elaborated the theory and method of cultural transfer which is a key notion of these historiographies.<sup>2</sup> Both entangled and transnational history endeavour to examine cultural transfers and eradicate the isolation of national cultures.

Entangled history realises approaches that cross borders even to world regions not by distinguishing with the help of comparison, rather by probing and investigating the mutual processes and moves across borders. It also concentrates on how these international social practices change while travelling from one part to the other. Since this discipline goes beyond the traditional national history, and examines different historical phenomena of countries and regions, therefore, it naturally challenges comparative history.

Transnational history explores actors, movements, and forces that cross boundaries. As Matthias Middell (*Debates on Transnational History*) expounded, it primarily means supranational moves and changes which cut into the fabric of nations. The discipline presupposes concrete systems of national histories, consequently, it is based on Europe as a framework for history, because until the beginning of the 20th century the term ‘nation’ in its classical meaning, that is, its 19th century form, could have been extended and interpreted only in Europe. Nevertheless, transnational history analyses supranational and international processes beyond national limits. Participants of social and cultural transfer can be located on a “grander-than-nation” horizon for thought and action that postulates supranational modernity and perspective. As Middell says, a sense of openness and experimentation is outmost characteristic of the discipline wherein the capacity of individuals and collectives to act (agency) and the so-called spacial turn, which interprets space as a social construct and construant, have a very peculiar role. Both entangled and transnational history by themselves are of comparative nature, so they cast doubt on the autonomous state of the comparative method.

This leads us to the question of comparison, specifically comparableness. In connection with this, Chris Lorenz (*Beyond Comparison? Some Remarks on the Present Debate*) spoke about the identification of some fundamental faults and weaknesses as well as refinements on the method. He thinks that the fundamental weakness of entangled history lay in the fact that this approach does not dissociate well-defined units for the examination, since it claims that international processes are inseparably and mutually bound to each

2 For the notion of cultural transfer, connectivism and transnational see M. Espagne, La construction d’une référence allemande en France. Genèse et histoire culturelle, in: Annales ESC (1987), p. 969-992; M. Middell, Kulturtransfer und Historische Komparatistik – Thesen zu ihrem Verhältnis, in: Comparativ, 10 (2000), N. 1, p. 1-32; M. Werner/B. Zimmerman, Penser l’histoire croisée: entre empirie et réflexivité, in: Annales. Histoire, sciences sociales 58 (2003), 7-36; M. Werner/B. Zimmerman, Vergleich, Transfer, Verflechtung. Der Ansatz der histoire croisée und die Herausforderung des Transnationalen, in: Geschichte und Gesellschaft 28 (2002), p. 607-636.

other, thus, in strict sense of the word guided comparisons are in fact impossible. On the contrary, Lorenz argues that if there is no separable elements for the examination, then entanglement itself becomes a system of hardly verifiable assumptions which has neither real object, nor refined research method. As opposed to this, comparative history can answer causal questions so that it has concrete research object and method.

In the case of transnational history a further methodological weakness arises. According to Middell, this approach reflects its object, while comparative perspective rather constructs its own object. Both Lorenz and Middell counterpose the well-established theoretical basis to the statement of transnationalists. Lorenz ventures further in the critique of transnationalist theory, for he argues that by analysing supranational processes only systems, such as region, nation, ideas, are compared, so it by itself makes a firm demand for the comparative method, forming all such histories into comparative history.

Intellectual challenges and poststructuralist theories require the refinement of the method itself. Due to the borrowings from historical sociology, Kocka emphasized the selection of the points and units of comparison which in a comprehensible way entails certain selection, abstraction, and decontextualisation to some degree. Nonetheless, a broader context must be kept in mind in which the units and concepts of comparison still remain understandable. Similarly to Lorenz, on the one hand, Kocka argues with the application of well-defined units, adequate method, and consistent use of clear-cut notions against transnationalists. On the other hand, he does not suppose a biting opposition between comparative and transnational history.

The methodological posing of the problem by Lorenz is of philosophical nature. In his view, the problem of causality can be best approached by the typology of 'why' questions.<sup>3</sup> The first type of the four 'why' questions tackles with some kind of phenomenon: for example, why is democracy only found in Western Europe? The second type explains a property: property "A": Germany, property "B": dictatorship, property "C": democracy. Why does it happen that "A" correlates with "C" in 1933, while "A" with "B" in 1935? The third type analyses the cause of a relation: property "A": authoritarian political system, property "B": illiberal bourgeoisie, property "C": liberal bourgeoisie. Why is it that in a given period of time property "A" supposed property "B" in Germany, while property "A" occurs with property "C" in France? The fourth type examines different propositions and the temporal: Why did the First World War break out in 1914, and not, for example, in 1916? Consequently, Chris Lorenz sets a concrete system against entangled and transnational history. In accordance with his argumentation, all why questions are contrastive questions, therefore, a historian has to make comparisons to be able to answer them.

The relationship between these disciplines of history was approached in a different way by Arnd Bauerkämper (*Europe as a Social Practice: An Interactive Approach to Modern*

3 To better understand the system of Lorenz, it is worth rephrasing the logic of causality by John Stuart Mill: if property "A" is present when property "B" also exists, then is there a situation when property "A" occurs without property "B" and vice versa? Consequently, we separate units during causal examinations.

*European History*). His lecture argued that two narratives could be possible in the historiography of European nations. The one is based on the traditional national concept, and realises the construction of otherness, that is, the history of each European nation is treated as separate phenomenon, and focuses on contrasting. The other is a construction of unity which, on the contrary, concentrates on intercultural communication, interaction, and exchange. This latter supposes technological and cultural transfers as well as social practices which can be understood only by doing comparisons. The lecture touched upon the point that these questions are feasible to be tackled on the basis of entanglements, but in that case the researcher would be faced with surprising difficulties because these transfers do not depend on either national paradigms, or a system of mutual entanglements. As it has been discussed earlier, the central nature of entangled history is the international interdependency. In compliance with this, Bauerkämper recommends an interactive approach which analyses the relationship of nations as well, however, reaches beyond the “web of entanglement” and tries to explain the process of concrete cultural appropriation or accommodation of social actors. In the context of this approach, comparative perspective helps to understand how the different social practices change in the course of interaction and transfer.

With due respect to social practice, Patrick Joyce (*Comparing What? Thoughts on the Limits of Comparison*) called attention to the influence of power on society. He is convinced that power is rooted in material as well as immaterial structures, thus, its role in social relationships cannot be analysed as a closed structure. He also alluded to Michel Foucault who supported the idea of open-ended and pliable structures instead of closed-up structures in his critique of traditional historiography, since no analysis should work with rigid and fixed notions and methods without the danger of forcing its own interpretation on its object. Parallely, Joyce emphasized that in using the theory and practice of comparative method, social structures and their relations to power have to be treated in a pliable way, for they usually change, therefore, a closed interpretative framework cannot be applied to them. The same ideas were expressed when Jürgen Kocka verbalised his demand for a more opened future attitude of historians. In connection with this, Matthias Middell commented that politics and political economy, which influence social processes and plays a determinant role in decisions concerning the bureaucracy and development of sciences, should be a highly important factor in historical research because governments and countries can give different priorities to certain economic or social political measures.

Concerning interaction and transfer, comparative perspective might develop the analyses of notions pertaining to European history and national identities as well. Just like Bauerkämper, Jan Ifversen (*Writing European Post-War History*) differentiated between two master narratives. The first, as I have already touched upon, focuses on the differences, while the second is forming around the motive of intergration in the interpretation of the notion of Europe, and aims at debunking the often distorted ideas European countries develop of each other. In accordance with Jürgen Habermas, Ifversen interprets history as a *learning process*, and concentrates on the consciousness of the collective which



is the more so important because it is the community of the European nation states that can enable the survival of their national identities in opposition to globalisation.

Every identity is a construction, an alloy of some mythical element and social-historical experience, then again, a necessary part of the life of a nation. But it seems that the constituents have an impact on the supranational existence as well. According to Ifversen, post-war Europe needs a new myth, for, on the one hand, pre-war forms of international thinking, such as opposition of nation states, grief policy, etc., cannot be rehearsed again, on the other hand, a new European identity is required due to the erosion and dissolution of opposing cold war systems. To achieve this aim, European nations have to familiarise themselves with each other, introduce a new chapter in their modern history which means a new historical discourse as well.

Parallely to Ifversen, Stefan Troebst (*Historical Meso-Regions: A Framework for Comparative Research*) offered a reinterpretation of the European regions which might serve as a geographical framework for comparisons. Within the question of forming and forging identities, György E. Szönyi (*“Extraterrestrial” Aspects of Comparative History: Genres and Media of Cultural Representations with a Special Emphasis on the Early Modern Period*) spoke of the notion of cultural representation by which he meant stories told by us to ourselves. The cultural representation that not only influences but also reflects identity can be either text or visual image.

As a relatively witty closing act of the methodological and philosophical train of thought might stand the interesting lecture of Antonis Liakos (*The Implied Canon of European History: Framework of Comparative Activities*) which analysed the inherent comparative aspect of self-representation and self-interpretation. According to Liakos, the canonical discourse of European historiography is a representation as well, if we assess our present and past in relation to something, and we are almost exclusively able to understand this in comparison. He goes on to say that this canon was so much embedded in Western culture that the moment of comparison became a nearly constant element of historical and literal thinking.

Miroslav Hroch's lecture counts particular (*Doing Comparative History in Real Socialism: A Personal Account*). Hroch represented the comparative method, in compliance with contemporary Western European humanities, under the Czechoslovakian communist regime as a legitim discipline of history which was exceptional if other socialist countries are taken into consideration from this viewpoint. One of his most important pieces of research was the comparative analysis of the Czech revolution of 1948. During this study he searched for connections with other revolutions, tested hypotheses, and tried to ascertain the causes and laws of the process. In accordance with Jürgen Kocka's functional categorization, he preferred the analytical function, and did not much differ from Kocka's method as well. Hroch chose certain processes and structures for comparison, then examined their analogous characteristics, finally tried to explain their general or specific features. Besides choosing the processes or phenomena for making a comparison, it is also indispensable to consequently apply the criteria of analysis. Hroch drew attention to the fact that the more elements are compared, the less comparative viewpoints are to be applied.

The participating humanists discussed the issues of the theory, method, and some practical considerations of comparative history during the conference. The protagonists of the comparative perspective emphasized the importance of this method in the field of contemporary historical research, while the supporters of entangled and especially *transnational history* concentrated on the processes of history. It was remarkable that the expression of transnational comparison had been increasingly employed by the end of the conference which might be a sign of future convergence of the approaches. Accordingly, the conference made a decisive step towards clarifying the conceptual framework of historical comparisons, however, the debate could hardly be called finished. The benefits of the conference might manifest themselves in the improvement of the international cooperation of historians, since, as has already been discussed in the introduction, it was the first stage of a multilevel initiative. To give a boost to East-Central European comparative historical research, *Pasts, Inc. Center for Historical Studies* plans further similar conferences and international workgroups. The Comparative History Project founded by *CEU Pasts, Inc.*, enlarged by the participants of the conference, can be regarded as such a workgroup. The *Center* also intends to evaluate and discuss the results of European comparative history with a special emphasis on East-Central European history.