

"Comparative history" is either an oxymoron or a misnomer (as well as poor grammar). Either it proposes to compare the stories of different phenomena by assuming common elements and terms, in which case it is not history; or else it juxtaposes different phenomena described in their own terms and contexts, in which case it cannot venture significant comparisons. At least these are the methodological extremes between which comparative and historical studies are situated, and I want to keep this theoretical predicament in mind as background to these comments on the practice of so-called "comparative history" and on areas in which comparison and history have intersected and interacted in the past two centuries.

#### 1. Conjectural Comparisons

Comparativism is as old as Plutarch, perhaps as Aristotle; but the practice, and especially the theory, of comparative--or, more properly, comparativist--history emerged during the European Enlightenment. Indeed the Enlightenment itself became a target of comparative study. To the famous question posed by the Berlin Academy of Sciences, "What is Enlightenment?" Immanuel Kant gave a famous answer; but his rationalist reply did not satisfy the more historical-minded scholars of that age, such as Kant's critic Christoph Meiners, who rephrased the question to read, "What is true Enlightenment?" By way of answer Meiners published

in 1793 a Historical Comparison between the Customs, Governments, Laws, Industries, Commerce, Religion, Science, and Education of the Middle Ages and those of our Own Times (1793).<sup>1</sup> Invidious as it is, this work is a good example not only of the practice of comparative history but also of its theory, illustrating as it does an essential aim of comparativism--finding present wisdom in the infinite variety of historical experience, with (in this case) the concept of Enlightenment (Aufklärung) providing the metahistorical grounds for comparison with less advanced or "barbarous" ages and the conventional "four-stage theory" fixing the periodization of this conjectural history.<sup>2</sup>

Another illustration of the comparativist impulse was the work of a younger French contemporary of Meiners, Baron M.-J. Degérando, also in response to a question posed by the Berlin Academy (1802), which was his Comparative History of the Systems of Philosophy with regard to the Principles of Human Knowledge (1804), written after the experience of exile and under the influence of French Idéologie.<sup>3</sup> In this survey Degérando compared a wide range of doctrines in order, he explained, "by studying the history of different sects, their birth, development, successions, conflicts, and mutual relations, to seize upon their true points of divergence, causes of their oppositions, and origins of their disputes," and so judge their utility for modern problems. In 1799 Degérando also published an ethnological work, The Observation of Savage Peoples, which, broadening his horizons in a way similar to Meiners, proceeded on

the basis of empirical investigation and comparative analysis of races to general laws of human science in the light of philosophy and a theory of human progress from barbarism to civilization.<sup>4</sup>

These are both examples of "conjectural history," as Dugald called it, comparing it to the French histoire raisonnée) and referring to Degérando); and it was continued by other scholars in the nineteenth century.<sup>5</sup> In 1820 François Guizot gave a famous course on comparative history tracing the development of "representative government" in England, France, and Spain, the common elements being the political principles of the division of powers, election, and publicity.<sup>6</sup> European social and political "systems," he argued, "have all a certain resemblance, a certain family likeness, which it is impossible to mistake.... The theocratic, monarchic, aristocratic, and popular creeds cross, combat, limit, and modify each other." In later lectures (1828-29) Guizot invoked the universalist conceits of Augustine and Bossuet, arguing that "European civilization has entered, if we may so speak, into the eternal truth, into the plan of providence; it progresses according to the intentions of God."<sup>7</sup> This assumption not only asserted the moral superiority of Europe but also defined the grounds for comparisons within the family of western nations.

Like his Enlightened predecessors Guizot took a stadial view, according to which European states all passed through four epochs: barbarism, feudalism, royalism, and the representative system--each of which provided grounds for comparison. On the

ancient category of barbarism, for example, Guizot commented, I know but of one way of attaining anything like a correct idea of the social and moral state of the germanic tribes is to compare them with the tribes who, in modern times, in various parts of the globe, in the interior of Africa, in the North of Asia, are still almost in the same degree of civilization, and lead very nearly the same life.<sup>8</sup>

In support of this he set down in parallel columns descriptions by Tacitus of the early Germans and by modern scholars, including Meiners, Robertson, Gibbon, Lafitau, and Lord Kames, of Hurons, Iroquois, Siberians, Greenlanders, Arabians, Tartars, et al. This sort of comparison, originating with Lipsius in the sixteenth century and continued by Vico and Robertson in the eighteenth, became a commonplace of comparative history in the nineteenth century.

Like his predecessors. too, Guizot was a presentist as well as a comparativist, and he did not conceal it. "To descend from this point of view is not within our power," he admitted. "Against our will, and without our knowledge, the ideas which occupy the present will follow us wherever we go in the study of the past. Vainly should we attempt to escape from the lights which they cast thereupon."<sup>9</sup> The lights to which Guizot referred was the representative form of government, which "everywhere...is demanded" and which is also a fact which "has its roots in the past political careers of nations," he continued, "as it has its

motives in their present condition." Nor was he, in his celebration of progress, above Meiners's sort of invidiousness: "Thank heaven," he exclaimed to his students, quoting Homer, "we are infinitely better than those who went before us."<sup>10</sup>

Another target of Guizot's comparativist interests was the phenomenon of Revolution, especially France in 1789 and England in 1640 and 1688. None of these revolutions was unexpected; each was grounded on age-old principles of resistance to absolutism and devotion to the "free consent of the people in reference to laws and taxes," principles underlying the "natural law" of human progress. For Guizot this comparison also underlay his political agenda--for he was always statesman first and scholar second--which brought him into power in the French Revolution of 1830 and which added another comparison. "Our minds were always full of the English revolution," he wrote of his doctrinaire colleagues who joined him in the government of the July Monarchy.<sup>11</sup>

In general Guizot occupied the same conceptual ground with Enlightened conjectural historians like Meiners and Degérando, who assumed a theoretical framework allowing comparisons across chronological and cultural divisions--so that barbarism, feudalism, representative government, and revolution changed their colors but not their natures in different parts of European tradition. Meiners relied on the idea of culture and of "reason" in a developmental sense; Degérando on the conventions and terminology of formal philosophy and its transmission, especially systems, ideas, doctrines, and schools; and Guizot on analogous

categories of political thought and action. In each case history was in effect an auxiliary, a source of examples and (in Guizot's terms) "facts," meaning either large abstractions, such as "civilization," or smaller elements common to different cultural traditions. All three of these historians worked within a developmental framework, although the biological analogy was assumed rather than critically examined.

This sort of evolutionary comparativism, a derivative of conjectural history, assumed that every culture, or nation, occupies a place on a trajectory of progress extending from the primitive, or backward, to the civilized, or advanced. On this basis it is easy enough, theoretically, to compare and even to calibrate the positions of particular cultural traditions. This is a view that has had currency from Vico and Montesquieu to Spengler, Toynbee and Fukuyama--and beyond--but it is not one, I think, that has much credit among historians these days, except perhaps for economic historians bound to a narrow version of liberal modernization theory or vulgar Marxist, or Marxoid, materialism--or else for neo-Augustinian universal history in globalist form. These are all survivals of that noble Enlightenment dream, which was conjectural history.<sup>12</sup>

## 2. Generic Comparisons

The nineteenth century was the heyday of comparativist studies, not only in history but also in language, literature, law, mythology, religion, and philosophy; and to these areas the

evolutionary model was increasingly applied. It was foundational for the historical school of law, led by Karl Friedrich von Savigny, who emphasized the "organic connection of law" with its host nations. "Law grows with the growth and strengthens with the strength of the nation," Savigny wrote, "and finally dies away as the nation loses its nationality." The same could be said of the history of literature, and here, too, the comparative method took root. Guizot's colleague at the Sorbonne, Abel-François Villemain lectured on this subject before joining Guizot in the political arena after 1830. Attending to the links between society and literature, Villemain included the interrelations between French and English letters and the influence of French on Italian literature--all as derivative of the Latin tradition. Indeed Villemain was apparently the first to employ the term "comparative literature."

Another major field for comparativist studies in the mid-nineteenth-century was ethnology, building on eighteenth-century ideas and discoveries and resting, as Peter Bowler has put it, "on the assumption that technologically primitive peoples represent exact equivalents of earlier stages in the development of more advanced societies."<sup>13</sup> In England Edward Tylor, John Lubbock, John McLennan, and Henry Sumner Maine operated on such premises, but they did so not as historians but as devotees of the human sciences of ethnology, anthropology, and law.<sup>14</sup> By "science" they meant not the "science of history" devoted to establishing facts but a systematic knowledge that would yield

general, causal explanations and even "laws."

The key discipline for the comparative method, however, was historical linguistics, or comparative philology, especially as it took form in the wake of the eye-opening discoveries of the "Oriental renaissance";<sup>15</sup> and here comparativism moved from a conjectural to a critical phase. The story begins with the insight of William Jones that Sanskrit, Greek, and Latin must have a common source. In 1816, building on the work of Jones and Friedrich Schlegel, Franz Bopp published his comparison of Sanskrit conjugation with that of the Greek, Latin, Persian, and Germanic languages, which "marks the birth of the Comparative Method." The idea of an original "Aryan" or "Indo-Germanic" language" (Bopp preferred the term "Indo-European" to the nationalistic, racialist "Indo-Germanic") from which modern languages were descended was reinforced by Darwin's theory of descent from a common ancestor. The reverse was also true, as Darwin was himself influenced by his reading in philology, including William Jones and later Friedrich Max Müller, to consider the significance of branching descent among languages.<sup>16</sup>

Finally, there is the controversial school of comparative mythology fathered by Max Müller, on the analogy of comparative philology and based on the Aryan hypothesis.<sup>17</sup> The methods of Max Müller and the anthropologist E. B. Tylor was also followed by the historian Edward Freeman in what he called "comparative politics," applied in particular to his study of western federalism, which he regarded as a solution to the international



problems of Europe in the later nineteenth century.<sup>18</sup> As for the study of mythology and religion comparativism has tended to retain its original universalist approach. For Mircea Eliade this universalism was justified by the concept of the "sacred," which, with its various symbols and rituals, drew together the most disparate cultures.<sup>19</sup> Eliade posited what he called "the logic of symbols," which raised his quest from the level of religious history to philosophy. Similar comparative approaches were employed in the sociology of religion, as explored by Weber, Joachim Wach, and others.<sup>20</sup> Georges Dumézil has been exceptional in retaining an Indo-Europeanist orientation, although the quest for mythical origins, proto-languages, and tripartite structures brings us back again to conjecture--and ideology.

In its developmental and especially evolutionary form comparativism was bound to inferable family ties, of genesis, affiliation and descent, which made the linguistic (and Darwinian) paradigm specific and dependant on empirical research.

The new comparativism transcended the old by its insistence on historical inquiry. General analogies based on intuition or logical argument were insufficient; what was required was evidence of connections at some point in time. For philology such historical links had to be established within common grammatical, syntactical, and phonetic categories which were shared by related languages but which were not applicable to such alien traditions as Chinese and the "New World Babel."<sup>21</sup> Old notions of "universal grammar" and "universal language" were,

moreover, irrelevant to the historical study of the family trees reconstructed by comparative philologists according to natural but concrete "laws" of transformation.<sup>22</sup> Yet as Antoine Meillet (one of Dumézil's teachers) admitted, comparisons do not yield real languages, only word-changes and some of its skeletal features.<sup>23</sup> The rest was a matter of myth and conjecture.

In historical studies comparativism followed a similar path, working within cultural traditions stemming from common origins, which were likewise inaccessible except through conjecture. Thus Marc Bloch, traced in a comparative way thaumaturgic kingship in France and England, while rejecting the possibility of finding the origins of this mystical practice and noting that this was the business of comparative ethnography.<sup>24</sup> Bloch's comparativist work on feudal society, too, was cast--like that of Guizot before him--within a common heritage of Roman and Germanic law and interrelated languages, and so in a common semantic field.<sup>25</sup> A similar project was undertaken by Charles Petit-Dutaillis, who compared the "evolution" of the feudal monarchies in France and England, concluded that their resemblances were due not to a common point of departure but to the "atmosphere" in which they grew and their common "nationalist aspirations."<sup>26</sup> A recent review of the question of feudalism by Susan Reynolds still concludes, "First there is a need for comparison."<sup>27</sup>

Nineteenth-century historiography in the genetic mode, which followed the lead of biological and linguistic science, projected national cultures back to ancient and medieval origins and were

similarly drawn to comparative studies. Thus "France" and "Germany" both traced their traditions back to Charlemagne, and beyond him to the barbarian tribes, the Germani, depicted by Tacitus and other classical authors.<sup>28</sup> The continuities argued by both historians and lawyers were accompanied by fabricated genealogies and institutional parallels; and from the sixteenth century comparisons were made of kingship, assemblies of estates, courts, and legal systems--a scholarly and tradition continued and drawn on by Guizot, Bloch, Petit-Dutaillis, and others.

A later contribution to this tradition is Antonio Marongiu comparative study of medieval parliamentary assemblies, which continues the evolutionary mode of interpretation.<sup>29</sup> Marongiu follows the development from forerunners in early medieval councils, ecclesiastical as well as lay, to mature parliamentary institutions. Like Guizot, he focuses on the principles of representation, but expands his view to include Italian and German as well as French, English, and Spanish examples; and he adds a glossary of terms to give substance to the parallels he draws across national boundaries. Marongiu's comparisons went far afield, including even a tenth-century Icelandic assembly, but he does not venture outside the traditions of western European thought and practice. This is also the case with C. H. McIlwaine's comparative study of "constitutionalism," which stretches back to ancient precedents, but which likewise remains within the terminological framework of western tradition.<sup>30</sup>

This old-fashioned institutional history was superseded by

self-declared "new" economic and social histories, which affected to look beneath the surface of political and legal institutions to underlying economic forces and social structures.<sup>31</sup> These approaches, inspired by methods of the social sciences, have made the tasks of comparative history simpler, but have also reverted in various ways to conjecture. In any case the recent "cultural turn" in historical studies has tended to supplant such radical and reductionist views and to restore some of the complexity of historical experience. But this methodological (and ideological) turn has again threatened the ground of comparative history.

### 3. General comparisons

Should comparative history be imprisoned in this evolutionary, usually Eurocentric paradigm? In fact comparative history has not been content with the limitations of a biological model, and has advanced, or reverted, to larger frameworks in which historical ties are disregarded--and in which answers to political, social, economic, and cultural questions are sought beyond the specificity of local experiences, contexts, and traditions. The premise is that a juxtaposition of two or more such traditions, whether separated in time or in space, will provide a sort of knowledge which conventional narrative history cannot reach. This is a noble dream, and it has been dreamed by the noblest of modern historians, most remarkably, perhaps, by Marc Bloch, who ventured to look, however briefly and hypothetically, beyond Eurocentric horizons to larger

connections, or analogies.

Bloch held open the possibility that the feudal model might be extended beyond the western context, to Japan, for example, and be seen as a "social type." "Have other nations passed through [this feudal phase]," Bloch asked; "and if so, under the action of what, perhaps common, causes? This is a secret to be revealed by future research."<sup>32</sup> Bloch himself, despite the influence of Durkheim, had doubts about such inflation of the comparative method, referring to the fashion of setting down parallel columns in the history of Asia and Europe. "But this procedure does not do much to solve the problems of mutual influence," he continued, "which are of paramount importance."<sup>33</sup>

In fact comparativist studies had to proceed not on further empirical research but rather on theoretical--conjectural--grounds. The problem is that for historians there exists no common ground for global comparisons beyond the conceptual (and parochial) ones supplied by scholars and their terminologies; for the history and mythology of feudal society and law between the Merovingians and the French Revolution is indeed peculiar to Europe, and especially to the Franco-Germanic heart of Europe, whose lawyers created the terminology of the fief-and-vassal institutional complex and argued--as historians still are still arguing--about its historical provenance (German or Roman or both?), and not about its status as a "social type."

Narrowly empirical and genetic concerns have been inadequate for a human science; and in the later nineteenth century

comparativist studies returned to the universalist ideals of the Enlightenment. This was the agenda, implicitly, of the new sciences of anthropology and sociology in the twentieth century.

Anthropologists have employed the concept of culture as a sort of universal solvent for customs, social behavior, and religious practice across the whole range of humanity. One offspring has been G. P. Murdoch's famous "Human Relations Area Files," a sort of Laplacean demon of anthropology which seems at cross purposes with history. Yet some of them have been aware of the dangers of indiscriminate comparisons, as in with Franz Boas's paper of 1936 on "The Limitations of the Comparative Method of Anthropology," which criticized the quest for universal evolutionary laws, and including Ruth Benedict's configurational views of culture, which stressed differences of contexts and the need to restrict comparisons to historically, ethnographically, and geographically related societies.<sup>34</sup>

Sociologists have been less cautious in their attachment to comparative methods. The great names of comparativism are still Emile Durkheim and Max Weber, whose visions, transcending even world history, aspired to a universal science of humanity.<sup>35</sup> Durkheim wanted to reach beyond particular events--l'histoire événementielle, it would later be called, semi-pejoratively--to collective patterns and processes; and his conceptualizations were of great significance to Bloch and other historians of the Annales school. Durkheim's sociological method was a variant of positivism, based on the collection and classification of facts,

which were de- (or re-) contextualized around particular social abstractions, starting with community and "Society" itself, its structures and its discontents; and comparative history, especially in France, inherited these generalizing inclinations.

In general sociology in its classic French form clung to rationalist, universalist, and systematizing ideals, devising social categories largely emptied of cultural specificity, "local knowledge," and historical sense--and did this in the name of scientific "explanation," which historical inquiry was often unable to accomplish. "When one has traced ideas to other ideas and shown so-called intellectual "influence," asked François Simiand, "In truth what has one explained?"<sup>36</sup>

Weber took a more critical view of sociological method and of comparatiuist study, rejecting the notion of general laws and Durkheim's functionalist and mechanical idea of causation and turning to interpretive methods to establish historical and social meaning. Yet while aware of differences and causal diversity, he, too, depended on metahistorical categories, such as the "ideal type" and the intellectual class of "honoratiores"; and he distinguished sociology from history in that it treated not just important actions (for history and human "destiny") but types of action (for social theory). Weber was enough of a pluralist to acknowledge different rationalisms, but he still depended on a sort of factor analysis that could be applied meaningfully across societies and cultures; and history remained an auxiliary to a higher science carrying on its systematic

comparativist projects in a language far above the "data."

#### 4. Comparative History

So where does "comparative history" stand in the midst of this Babel of comparisons, this bedlam of comparativisms? In the past generation or two the study of comparative history has come under fire, it seems to me, at least indirectly, precisely because of reliance on these antiquated, conjectural credentials.

Old-fashioned or even up-dated Durkheimian and Weberian sociology and their offspring contain a number of assumptions that are not easily reconcilable with some of the newer tendencies in the human sciences. I refer not to unreflective positivism which is distrustful of theory of any sort but rather to what has been called "interpretive social science" and the fundamental importance of "local knowledge" which have cast doubt on the universal categories on which social science has traditionally relied.<sup>37</sup> Interpretation rather than explanation, hermeneutics rather than analysis, has been the motto of this school; and its views have been reinforced by postmodernist attitudes that are even more skeptical about rational and universal "grounds for comparison."

Comparativism indeed has a place in the human sciences, but only on the basis of metahistorical categories and terminologies, explicit or implicit, which define such disciplines as political science, economics, sociology, and anthropology--each of which, to be effective, must take a reductionist view of human behavior.



Whatever the theoretical divisions may be, political thought is bound to the public sphere and normally the state, economics to the market, sociology to more or less abstract ideas of society, and anthropology to ideas of "culture" translatable from context to context. Differences, which are the essence of historical inquiry, are avoided or marginalized, overshadowed by theoretical constructs, which may be the foundations of human science but which are the scholastic fictions of historical inquiry.

Here are the words of an author of one of at least three books written on "post-modernism and the social sciences" in the past three years. Pauline Marie Rosenau writes,

The very act of comparing, in an effort to uncover similarities and differences is a meaningless activity because post-modern epistemology holds it impossible to define adequately the elements to be contrasted or likened.<sup>38</sup>

The belief, or at least the suspicion, is that cultures are incommensurable and are not situated, for parochial scholars (as we all must be in our experiences and training), in a semantic field in which meaning, at least historical meaning, can be established.

I should add that, following the line of the new anthropology, recent historical or ethnographic studies of the exotic, the marvelous, and the "Other" (originally a theological conception, I believe) have reinforced this skeptical distrust of easy historical comparisons. Such investigations, especially if

we listen to scholars trained in literary and linguistic fields, "leads to the radical questioning of the foundations of Western thought," as one historian of women and women's literature has written.<sup>39</sup> And this specifically applies to comparative history, which has been constructed in a conspicuously Western mode, whether colonialist or postcolonialist and which consistently (as this scholar adds) has, in the interests of its own empowerment, tried to deny the "otherness of the Other." What Michel de Certeau calls "heterology" is projected beyond the "barbarian other" witnessed by Herodotus to countless foreign, alien, outlandish groups, some still to be found, lying beyond "our" cultural horizons.<sup>40</sup>

## 5. Beyond Comparison

These remarks on the question of alterity, or heterology, are offered not as a counsel of despair but to suggest the sort of criticism that comparativism must confront in order to avoid the disciplinary ghettoizing which so many historical specialties have experienced. It is understandable that many comparativists would prefer to carry on their practices without reflecting on epistemological or methodological problems; but claiming a historical base, direction, and goal to these practices carries some obligation to consider such questions.

Grounds for comparison in history cannot be limited to naturalistic foundations, that is, the lowest common denominators defined by physical, biological, medical, or genetic factors.

Nor can they be mapped merely by familiar categories of political science, economics, sociology, or even anthropology in their classic western forms--updated versions of the "conjectural history" of the Enlightenment. Historical comparisons need always to include, and to accentuate, differences over common features. The past is indeed (to repeat what has become a cliché) "a foreign country," and historians are not tourists seeking familiar shopping experiences or confirmation of their preconceptions; they are explorers looking for difference and the strange, often incommensurable, ways, of others. Classically, history was the "mistress of life" and still is--not, however, in the naive and vulgar sense of teaching direct lessons for prediction and policy-making but rather as a way of opening intellectual horizons to the unprecedented and the unexpected, which subvert established categories and provoke questions beyond the conventions of (in Kuhn's term) "normal" human science.

This may seem to go against the grain of western science and philosophy. As Hegel declared, "The course of history does not show us the Becoming of things foreign us but the Becoming of ourselves and of our knowledge."<sup>41</sup> But whatever "History" may have been for the "We" and the "Ourselves" of Hegel's formula, historical practice cannot be so confident and ego- or ethno-centric. Sometimes the hermeneutical circle cannot be completed.

Objecting to the explanatory efforts of Frazer's Golden Bough, Wittgenstein once remarked, "Here one can only describe and say: this is what human life is like."<sup>42</sup>

"History" began as inquiry and indeed, in the practice of Herodotus, implicitly comparative inquiry--"barbarism" constituting for him the Other of his ethnographic discussions--and after two and a half millennia it retains this heuristic function, drawing perhaps on other conceptual traditions of philosophy and the human sciences, but tied still to observation and testimony which shape questions as well as answers.

Here again we may take a leaf from the book of anthropology. In some ways these extremes are similar to the polarity or paradox experienced and described by Claude Levi-Strauss in Tristes Tropiques, which is the condition of impenetrable strangeness reflected in a foreign culture at first contact as contrasted with the familiarity gained by prolonged study of the strange customs and language.<sup>43</sup> Such bridges can often be built between the strange and the familiar, between the present and the past, between the "I" and the "Thou," but how does one lead others across these bridges or indeed return oneself? And what about the natives described--are they the strange inhabitants or anthropologized puppets--Pinocchios who, which, cannot quite be trusted? The only passage across these bridges, it seems to me, is by way of some sort of historical or anthropological license or leap of faith, by creative analogy or anachronism, by interpretation and translation, or paraphrase, in which something must always be lost; and it is wise to recognize the limits of this version of the hermeneutical circle.

Comparative history, if it must be called that, should be

carried on somewhere between these poles of skepticism and credulity, between the alien familiarities joined by a bridge of critical scholarship. This is not to say that such paradoxes will not be pursued with good will, insight, and even interesting results for some purposes, but it is to suggest that they occupy an inter-disciplinary area which demands standards and methods beyond the confines of the discipline of history and that a certain leap of faith is required to find a suitable grounding where relativities can be overcome or evaded. Comparative history takes us beyond what Le Roy Ladurie calls the territory of the historian."

Beyond these very general considerations let me offer a few examples to illustrate the criticisms which I am suggesting and to provide some concrete grounds for comparativist discussion here. Among comparativist historians operating in my general area of study two striking examples have been Fernand Braudel and William McNeill, although it is difficult, here and elsewhere, to distinguish comparative history from global (world, universal) history. Both Braudel and McNeill make wide-ranging comparative judgments, but these are made mainly on universal grounds, such as climate, geography, biological regimes, group behavior, and other contexts that may be regarded as natural--or else material civilization and world economic or proto-capitalist market systems that are tied to the most rudimentary (and indeed pre-historical) level of culture--"erst kommt das Essen." What they offer is some sort of universal solvent in which quantifiable

data can be dissolved uniformly and so subjected to general judgments. But strictly historical questions often remain, as in the essential demographic equivalence which Braudel sees between China and Europe--and yet which must be explained by quite different factors. Does this sort of factor-analysis really offer grounds for "comparative history"?

Another example closer to the sort of history I am obliged to practice these days is the "comparative history of ideas," to invoke the title of the masterly work of Prof. Hajime Nakamura--following in a way the lead of Degérando but with truly global horizons.<sup>44</sup> Here again it seems necessary to seek a common denominator to accommodate the range and variety of ideas and beliefs of civilizations east and west; and this Nakamura finds in what he calls the "core problems" of philosophy, such as the nature of the gods, or of God, the nature of the absolute, the search for first principles (water, space, wind, fire, etc.), for the self, for epistemological and ethical foundations. In this sense philosophy, mythology, and religion all overlap, and Nakamura finds the distinction between philosophy and religion as western premise that undercuts comparative study. I find it interesting that the theologico-philosophical framework in which Nakamura operates requires just that idea of a primitive wisdom from which scholarly historians of philosophy (western philosophy anyway) have struggled for generations to extricate themselves. One step forward in comparativist terms, some critics might conclude, is two steps backwards in historical terms.

One final example of fruitful comparative historical inquiry still going on comes from the history of science, which took a comparative turn, especially in the famous work of Joseph Needham--although in fact early modern scholars had long before laid the groundwork for such studies. In his work Needham went beyond the crude comparativist premises of classical sociology; but as Toby Huff writes in his study of early modern science in Islam, China, and the West, the comparativist project of Needham has been pursued beyond his eclectic (and Marxoid) efforts to explain differences in terms of what used to be called the external history of science--that is facilitating and inhibiting geographical, economic, social, and political factors, though excluding for the most part religion and culture.<sup>45</sup>

As for the internal history, it must be said that task has been made easier by the fact that modern science, the hard sciences at least, has achieved a universal language, which Galileo famously called "the language of mathematics [whose characters are] triangles, circles, and other geometric figures without which it is humanly impossible to understand a word of it." The interpretation of Nature, the most cryptic book open to human inquiry, the greatest and most impenetrable Other of all, requires such a metalanguage for communication--as in a sense does any comparative undertaking.

In general, it seems to me, comparative history--that is, comparative studies that depend on history--cannot pretend to anything like the grand narratives of old-fashioned universal

history or speculations about capital E-Enlightenment or capital C- Culture. Rather it should concern itself with issues which are arguably common--i. e., "natural," as scholars used to say--to various cultures, such as gender, family, succession, rites of birth and death, suicide, trade, technology, property, slavery, racism, imperialism, revolution, science, and technology; and it should be aware not only of the conceptual limitations of a comparative line of questioning but also of the inescapably unhistorical and interpretive character of its answers. Too many unclassifiable factors escape the net of comparativism. This means that comparative inquiries must be interdisciplinary in approach and to that extent must transcend the conventional methods of history. The practice and theory of what is called comparative history should include the findings and the meta-historical premises of other human sciences, including sociology, political science, perhaps philosophy, and especially anthropology; and in seeking a tenable grounding it must go beyond the "territory of the historian."

Now, toward such metahistorical and synthetic projects I am at least selectively favorable, but I prefer not to confuse them with historical inquiry and criticism as such. To anyone who has larger aspirations, I apologize for the apparently negative drift of these remarks; but I speak only as a skeptical and, despite flirtations with other disciplines, basically uncomparative historian. By itself history has always been better at posing questions than at finding answers, and I hope these questions may



be useful in finding acceptable grounds for comparison.

#### Notes

- 1... Historische Vergleichung der Sitten und Erfassungen, des Gesetz und Gewerbe, des Handels, und der Religion, der Wissenschaften, und Lehranstalten des Mittelalters mit denen derselben Jahrhunderts in Rücksicht auf die Vortheile und Nachteile der Erklärung (Hannover, 1793), 465.
- 2... See Ronald L. Meek, Social Science and the Noble Savage (Cambridge, 1976), and Smith, Marx, and After (London, 1977).
- 3... Histoire comparée des systèmes de philosophie relativement aux principes des connaissances humaines (3 vols.; Paris, 1804), following De la Génération des connaissances humaines (Berlin, 1902).
- 4... The Observation of Savage Peoples, tr. F. C. T. Moore (Berkeley, 1969) and see George Stocking, Jr., Race, Culture, and Evolution (Chicago, 1968), 21-28.
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