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Comparative and Transnational History

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Abstract

Historians often see transnational history and comparative history as opposing concepts in contradiction to each other. The latter is regarded as viewing history exclusively through the eyes of national history and constructing differences between countries, while the first one is seen as an approach which strictly avoids and transcends history through national eyes. The aim of this article is to demonstrate that it does not make any sense to separate artificially historical comparison from the investigation of flows and transfers between countries.

Keywords: *Political History, Comparative History, Transnational History, Historiography*

Transnational history and comparative history at first glance look closely related, since both approaches make an effort to go beyond national history. But historians often see them as opposing concepts. Comparative history is regarded as viewing history exclusively through the eyes of national history and constructing differences between countries. Quite to the reverse, transnational history is seen as an approach, which strictly avoids and transcends history through national eyes. But are transnational and comparative history in fact necessarily in strict contradiction to each other? I shall treat and discuss first transnational history and thereafter comparative history.

1. Transnational history

Transnational history has become an important and productive perspective of historical research on the period of the nation State during the 19th and 20th centuries. Its main focus is to overcome the narrow limits of national history. Transnational history as a notion has had a spectacular career since the 1990s in writings in the major world languages¹. To be sure,

¹ Cf. Ngram Viewer. For different views on the rise of international history: P.Y. Saunier, *Transnational History*, London, Palgrave, 2013, introductory section; J. Kocka, *Global History: Opportunities, Dangers, Recent Trends*, in «Culture and History Digital Journal», 1 (2012), pp. 1-6; M. Del Pero, G. Formigoni, (eds.) *Storia internazionale, transnazionale, globale. Una discussione*, special issue of «Ricerche di Storia Politica», 2 (2016); J. Osterhammel, A "Transnational" History of Society: Continuity or New Departure? in H.G. Haupt, J. Kocka (eds.), *Comparison and Transnational History: Central European Approaches and New Perspectives*, New York-Oxford, Berghahn, 2012, pp. 39-51; C. Maier, *Designing the 20th Century to History: Alternative Narratives for the Modern Era*, in «American Historical Review», 105 (2000), pp. 807-831; P. Finney,

transnational history was actually written long before, especially in the sphere of economic and cultural history. Topics with a transnational scope such as industrialisation, capitalism, urbanisation, population growth, epidemics, styles in the arts, changing values, imperialism and the history of civilizations had been treated in a transnational perspective. But they were seen as topics for specialists. They did not inspire historians to invent a new term for the entire discipline. Only since the 1990s has transnational history been seen as a reorientation of the discipline. It was not immediately followed by all historians, but became a widely accepted and discussed focus of books and conferences.

This new orientation is not simply a hope. It has been bolstered by highly successful books, which are partly mentioned later. Transnational history is often proposed by historians of non-European cultures, who want to dialogue with European historians, though also by experts from European countries who are unhappy with purely national history. It is often encouraged in local scientific settings gathering transnational experts of many cultures in large universities and cities. It is inspired by the international careers and experience of numerous historians. It also reflects general trends such as economic globalisation of the 1980s and 1990s, the increasing elite and mass migration, the rise of international digitalisation in everyday life since the 1990s, as well as rising international criminality, civil war and terrorism.

Transnational history is driven by various different motivations. Historians expect to understand the globalised world since the early modern period better by transnational history than by narrow national history. They hope that the history of international problems such as migration, environment, financial markets, digitalisation, epidemics, refugees, organised criminality or terrorism may help us to discern major challenges and imminent threats perhaps to individual nations. By transnational history historians also want to avoid the trap of national history, which might force historians into the logic of nationalism, the construction of national superiority and a nationalist interpretation of history as well as making us forget that the critique of national governments by historians often is based on international exchange, on international comparisons and on the study of international transfers. Historians also hope that the history of international organisations, movements and exchanges will contribute to our understanding of the making of peace and the solution of impending international problems. Of course, transnational research is usually not driven by direct utilitarian application to politics. But these motivations play a role in the task of enlightening the public.

Transnational history, however, is not a homogeneous approach. It not only changes its meaning because national history is changing continuously, it also comprises a wide variety of complementary and sometimes conflicting approaches and methods, such as history of transfers, comparative history, global history, history of regions and history of international relations. Hence, transnational history is not a specific programme of historical research, but an attitude in designing research in the best case, wishful thinking in the worst case².

Introduction: What is International History?, in P. Finney (ed.), *Palgrave Advances in International History*, London, Palgrave 2005, pp. 1–35.

² A selection of articles: K.K. Patel, *Transnational history*, in *Europäische Geschichte Online (EGO)*, ed. by the Leibniz Institut für Europäische Geschichte, Mainz, 2011; Id., *Überlegungen zu einer*

Transnational history is not a fully consistent or clear term for four reasons especially. These ought to be kept in mind, even though they are not fundamental obstacles to using the term. First, in a strict sense it is confined to the period of the predominance of nation States during the 19th and 20th centuries. Only in this period does the term «transnational» make sense. This, however, is a relatively short part of history. No doubt, the idea behind the term «transnational», the history of interconnections between States and cultures, is also highly attractive for other eras.

Secondly, the term transnational history even for the 19th and 20th centuries has the disadvantage that the nation State never became reality in all parts of the globe, even though it gradually became the prevailing model. Transnational history in the strict sense of the word does not cover empires, an important form of the State in the 19th century, i.e. neither the Czarist empire nor the Habsburg empire nor the Ottoman empire nor the European empires overseas. It also does not cover the weak States of the 20th century, which are not able to control the territory as the nation State does.

A third shortcoming of the term: It suggests that all interconnections between nations have a basically similar character. However, transnational interconnections within an empire, e.g. between the USSR and Poland in the Soviet empire or even postcolonial relations between Portugal and Mozambique, are fundamentally different from Franco-German transnational interconnections between two countries on equal terms. Transnational interconnections in trade and consumption in the 1950s between the economically powerful US and the importing Latin American countries are different from the interconnections between more equal countries such as Japan and Britain after World War II. The term «transnational» does not lead one to reflect on the highly unequal interconnections between nation States.

Finally, transnational history is changing, because the line between national and transnational history is changing. The closer it comes to the present, the more national history of the 19th and 20th century is obliged to cover transnational interconnections not only because of the World Wars and because of international organisations such as the European Union, but also because of rising international economic and cultural interconnections. Especially for the period since World War II the traditional border line between national and international history is

transnationalen Geschichte, in «Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft», 52 (2004); P. Gassert: *Transnationale Geschichte*, Version: 2.0, in «Docupedia Zeitgeschichte», (2012); J. Osterhammel, *A "Transnational" History of Society*, cit., pp. 39-51; M. Pernau, *Transnationale Geschichte*, Goettingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2011; A. Iriye, P.Y. Saunier (eds.), *Palgrave Dictionary of Transnational History*, London, Palgrave, 2003; P.Y. Saunier, *Transnational History*, cit.; C. Conrad, *Vergleich und Transnationalität in der Geschichte*, in A. Wirsching (eds.), *Oldenbourg Geschichte Lehrbuch. Neueste Zeit*, München, Oldenbourg, 2006, pp. 317-332; G. Budde, S. Conrad, O. Janz (eds.), *Transnationale Geschichte. Themen, Tendenzen und Theorien*, Goettingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2006; H. Siegrist, *Transnationale Geschichte als Herausforderung der wissenschaftlichen Historiographie*, «geschichte.transnational», (2004), geschichte-transnational.clio-online.net/forum/id=575&type=artikel; M. Middell, *Transnational Challenges to National History Writing*, Houndmills-New York, Palgrave, 2013; B. Struck, K. Ferris, J. Revel, *Space and Scale in Transnational History*, in «The International History Review», 4 (2011), pp. 573-84; J.H. Meyer, *Transnationale Geschichte. Eine Perspektive*, in «Historische Mitteilungen der Ranke-Gesellschaft», 36 (2013); J. Dülffer, W. Loth (eds.), *Dimensionen internationaler Geschichte*, München, Oldenbourg, 2012.

blurred. For the historian, the national territory has become, according to Charles Maier, «a problematic basis for collective political security and increasingly irrelevant for economic activity»³.

One can observe four meanings of transnational history. A first and most general meaning of transnational history comprises studies which *transgress national borders intellectually* and treat more than a single nation State, empire or political territory within its confines⁴. A study which compares France with Britain or a study which covers all South East Asian countries or a global history which is a more or less a comprehensive synthesis of all nation States of the world will already be seen as transnational, even though the nation State is kept as the main unit of research.

Transnational history in this first meaning also includes studies on one single country, provided interconnections outside the territory are investigated. For this type of research the term transnational was first used in the 1860s by Georg Curtius, who argued that all national languages import important notions from other languages and integrate these notions with a specific meaning in the national language⁵. In a similar perspective, an innovative study for transnational history, the book by Sebastian Conrad on the external interconnections of Bismarck empire and on nationalism as a consequence of rising external interconnections, belongs to this type of transnational research⁶. The French historian Rémy Brague called this the Roman method: borrowing as much as possible from other countries and integrating this into the national culture and national society⁷. Most societies use the method in a more or less intensive way. So, this transnationalised study of individual nations can be applied to most countries. Studies on the global connections of villages or towns in a similar framework try to demonstrate that local history is not necessarily the history of a national periphery, but can also be transnationalised⁸.

Transnational historical studies in this first meaning also include an equally promising field of research, i.e. studies on regions or cultures which comprise several or many nation States such as Europe, Africa, Latin America, South East Asia, East Asia. Transnational historical studies on regions face specific challenges. They go in two directions. On the one hand, they treat the internal diversities and common features of regions and usually tend to cover not just bilateral, but multilateral transfers and differences. The study by Christophe Charle on European theatres is a successful recent example⁹. On the other hand, impressive studies cover the

³ C.S. Maier, *Transformations of territoriality*, in G. Budde, S. Conrad, O. Janz, *Transnationale Geschichte*, cit., 2006, p. 48.

⁴ Cf. examples of use of the term in the broad sense: C. Charle, *Jalons pour une histoire transnationale des universités*, in «Cahier d'histoire. Revue d'histoire critique», 121 (2013), pp. 21-42; F. Bensimon (ed.), *Pour une histoire transnationale du travail*, in «Le mouvement social», 241 (2014); J. Beckert, J. Eckert, M. Kohli, W. Steeck (eds.), *Transnationale Solidarität: Chancen und Grenzen*, Frankfurt, Campus, 2004.

⁵ G. Curtius, *Philologie und Sprachwissenschaft: Antrittsvorlesung gehalten zu Leipzig am 30. April 1862*, Leipzig, Teubner 1862, p. 9, cited in P.Y. Saunier, *Palgrave Dictionary of Transnational History*, cit., p. 1047.

⁶ S. Conrad, *Globalisierung und Nation im deutsche Kaiserreich*, Munich, Beck, 2006.

⁷ R. Brague, *Europe, la voie romaine*, Paris, Gallimard, 1992.

⁸ Cf. M. Kearny, *The Local in the Global: The Anthropology of Globalization and Transnationalism*, in «American Review of Anthropology», 24 (1995), pp. 547-565.

⁹ C. Charle, *Théâtres en capitales. Naissance du spectacle à Paris, Berlin, Londres et Vienne*, Paris, Albin Michel, 2008.

external comparisons and transfers between regions or cultures¹⁰. Jürgen Osterhammel has discussed this second direction in an exemplary way. He also argues that this transnational history of cultures inevitably ends in a mixed research on differences, transition zones, mutual influences and hybrid forms of life¹¹.

This broad meaning of transnational history, which includes historical comparison, comprises a large variety of studies. Not all of them call themselves «transnational». This broad label has been criticised for being too vague and for including too many different approaches without a common method. But it reflects a widely shared, not highly theorised interest in history beyond national history.

Besides this broad meaning of transnational history three more specific ways of understanding it have been proposed, though they are not always clearly separated from each other.

One specific meaning of transnational history covers research on interconnections between countries *beyond government policies*. Transnational history is conceived in contrast to international history, i.e. in contrast to interconnections between countries via governments, such as diplomatic history or history of international relations. This meaning of transnational history, which can be found especially in studies on cultural history, comprises a more open diplomatic history which also includes cultural history. This meaning of transnational history does not necessarily exclude comparison between countries.

A second, still more specific, meaning regards transnational history as a contrast to history using the nation as the unit of research. Transnational history in this strict sense means the *transcendence of national history*. Transnational history means completely giving up the nation as a unit of research. A geographic scale larger than the nation State is chosen. So, the history of the Alps or the history of the Mediterranean Sea or the Pacific Ocean, the history of a commodity such as salt or horses or motor cars, or the history of an intellectual and political concept such as parliament or liberalism or the history of a concept in the arts such as surrealism or rock music is seen as transnational, provided that the study is not limited to one nation State. This meaning of transnational history by definition excludes comparisons among nations and nation States.

A third more specific meaning, close to the second one, is transnational history in terms of transfers between countries, sometimes seen as progress. The editors of the Palgrave dictionary of transnational history, Akira Irye and Pierre-Yves Saunier, introduced this meaning of transnational history in saying that transnational history means «links and flows», i.e. «people, ideas, products, processes and patterns that operate over, across, through, beyond, above, under, or in-between polities and societies»¹². A similar view is held by Mathias Middell, who runs a

¹⁰ Cf. as widely read examples of global history: J. Osterhammel, *The Transformation of the World: A Global History of the Nineteenth Century*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2014; C.A. Bayly, *The Birth of the Modern World 1780-1914. Global Connections and Comparisons*, Oxford, Blackwell, 2004.

¹¹ J. Osterhammel, *Transkulturell vergleichende Geschichtswissenschaft*, in Id., *Geschichtswissenschaft jenseits des Nationalstaats. Studien zu Beziehungsgeschichte und Zivilisationsvergleich*, Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2001, pp. 11-45; cf. also J. Osterhammel, *A "Transnational" History of Society*, cit., pp. 39-51.

¹² A. Iriye, P.Y. Saunier (eds.), *Palgrave Dictionary of Transnational History*, cit., p. XVIII; cf. also P.Y. Saunier, *Transnational History*, cit.

digital section called «Geschichte.transnational». He presents that section as a «specialist forum on the history of cultural transfer and the interweaving of transnational relationships in Europe and the world»¹³. This meaning of transnational history again definitely does not include historical comparison, especially if the comparison is aiming only at differences between countries. The reverse: transfers are seen as a crucial part of transnational history, since it is sometimes assumed that transfers *never* use the nation State (or State) as a unit of research. We shall come back to this not very realistic difference.

2. Comparative history

Comparative history is partly regarded as a variation of national history, since the units of comparison are still frequently nations and comparative history often focuses on differences between nations, hence a continuation of the predominance of national history. As a consequence, comparative history is sometimes simply not treated in articles of transnational history or in the best case is seen as an early first step of transnational history, which has meantime been transcended. But is this realistic?

To be sure, the classical definition of historical comparison might at first glance corroborate the impression. Historical comparison is usually regarded as a systematic confrontation of two or several historical units (localities, regions, nations, civilisations, personalities, institutions or eras) for exploring differences and similarities, divergences and convergences not only by describing, but also by explaining and typification. In addition, one crucial goal of historical comparison has always been the inclusion of the wider historical context, different contexts as well as common contexts¹⁴.

The definition of historical comparison is above all a summary of research by historians rather than a normative rule. Hence the validity of the definition very much depends on the trends in actual research rather than on theoretical conclusions. In fact, three recent research trends need to be taken into account.

First, historians often investigate differences among *a very few cases*, preferably only between two cases, since the exploration of sources and the extensive inclusion of the historical context often renders historical comparison among more than two or three cases arduous and unfeasible. Differences between nation States or national cultures and societies clearly predominate. This is why historical comparison is partly excluded from transnational history.

¹³ Geschichte.transnational on: <http://www.connections.clio-online.net/>.

¹⁴ Cf. a selection of mostly recent publications in English on the method of historical comparison: M. Bloch, *A Contribution Towards a Comparative History of European Society*, in Id., *Land and Work in Medieval Societies*, New York, Harper, 1969, pp. 44-81; original French version: *Pour une histoire comparée des sociétés européennes*, in «Revue de synthèse historique» 46 (1928), pp. 15-50; H.G. Haupt, *Comparative History*, in N.J. Smelser, P.B. Baltes, (eds.), *International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral sciences*, Amsterdam, Elsevier, 2002, vol. 4, pp. 2397-2403; H.G. Haupt, J. Kocka, (eds.), *Comparative and Transnational History: Central European Approaches and New Perspectives*, Oxford-New York, Berghahn, 2011; T. Welskopp, *Comparative History*, in «EGO, European history online» <http://ieg-ego.eu>; H. Kaelble, *Historischer Vergleich*, https://docupedia.de/zg/Historischer_Vergleich.

In addition, recent historical comparisons look not only for differences, but also for interconnections, since intensive flows of ideas, persons or commodities can explain weak differences and refusal to exchange can explain rising differences. Hence for understanding and explaining similarities and differences interconnections play a crucial role and receive high priority. It is important to investigate not only flows, but also interruptions and rejections of flows. When historical comparison was first conceptualised by Marc Bloch, he believed that historical comparison should be confined to neighbouring societies, which are closely intertwined. For Bloch interconnection was a key to historical comparison¹⁵. This is a heritage, which counts.

Moreover, in contrast to the preference for few cases as above mentioned, different types of *comparison of many cases* have emerged, e.g. the historical comparison of a substantial number of countries in larger regions such as Europe or Latin America or Africa and in global history comparing several empires or many nations. These may perhaps not have been sufficiently theorised, but they are being done. Studies on regions and studies on the entire globe do not have exactly the same logic. For studies on regions common features are more important than for global studies. But multilateral interconnections are an important dimension on the regional as well as on the global level. On the whole the two contrasting tendencies, concentrating on two or a few cases and covering many countries, does not create conflicts, but makes it more difficult to find an overarching definition.

Is comparative history falling behind transnational history? Comparative history remains an important historical method. Apart from anything else, historical comparison is simply continuing to be done. Important comparative books appear on the global level, on the regional level as well as the national and local level. Internationally oriented historians continue to compare. A glance at leading journals such as the French «Annales», the Italian «Ricerche di Storia Politica», the British «Past & Present», «The American Historical Review», the German «Geschichte und Gesellschaft» or a leading digital book review platform such as «HSK» shows that comparative articles and books are published continuously and sometimes even quite frequently. Among the highly prestigious projects by historians financed by the European Research Council, many projects are comparative¹⁶. Comparison, besides, is not a method of the older generation. Among the current dissertation projects in Germany for instance, a substantial number are comparative¹⁷. So, the present trend is not in disfavour of historical comparison. Of course, historical comparison is continuously being reflected on, rethought and redefined as a method. It has changed substantially since the 1970s. It has also lost the character of an adventure, a new orientation, or start-up of historical research. However, in the end, it is not on the decline, but a well-established method frequently chosen by established researchers as well as PhD students.

Moreover, historical research is an answer to the challenge posed by the rise of comparison in politics and in everyday life. International organizations such as the Oecd, the European Union, the Unesco, the Ilo and also national governments are putting forward international comparisons in public debates for political goals. Pisa for instance, which com-

¹⁵ M. Bloch, *Pour une histoire comparée des sociétés européennes*, cit., p.26.

¹⁶ https://erc.europa.eu/projects_and_results (section SH& for history and archaeology).

¹⁷ <http://www.historikerverband.de/nachwuchs/promotio.html>.

pares national performance in education across the globe, has initiated many political debates and policies. So has the indirect method of coordination by the EU in various fields of politics. National governments also support the comparative view. Moreover, rising international professional careers and international travel stimulate the comparison of their own country with others countries in everyday life. New challenges for historical comparison are constantly emerging. For instance, historians are asked to explain striking differences in educational performance, or the historical reasons for the British «Brexit» in comparison with continental Europe or the historical causes of the differences between the Southern and the Northern part of Europe in tax paying and welfare state.

Another challenge for comparative historians is historical comparison by the social sciences. Already during the upswing of historical comparison in the 1970s and 1980s books by historical sociologists and political scientists such as Reinhard Bendix, Barrington Moore, Charles Tilly, Shmuel Eisenstadt, Stein Rokkan and Peter Flora provided models and encouragement for historians who wanted to compare. Social scientists continue to write stimulating comparative history. Historians, again, have much to contribute in some fields of comparative history such as the international history of educational opportunities or of health prospects during the 20th century, or the international history of social mobility and elites in the 20th century. At the same time the comparative research by historians cannot be replaced. Historians can give answers which others will not give. Comparisons by historians often depict the historical context more intensely. Historians often use sources differently and see the novelty of trends and the rise of new eras in a special way. If comparison by historians declined, history as a discipline would lose an important part of its scientific potential.

As historical comparison is practised, it forms part of transnational history for various reasons, which were already propounded under the concept of *histoire croisée* by Michael Werner and Bénédicte Zimmermann¹⁸. The differences between transnational history and historical comparison are at times not as large as is commonly believed.

1. A fundamental trench is sometimes seen between historical comparison corroborating nation-building and the history of transfers which transcends the framework of national history. But is this trench really so clear? The historian who compares, has intellectually to cross the borders of his nation, not only because he needs to visit foreign archives and read sources of unpublished historical information, but also because he has to understand the research, the special terminology and the debates of foreign historians, as well as different historical comparisons in other countries. Comparison means immersion in a foreign context. Comparison means to have done, as Marc Bloch put it, «with the endless chat from one national history to the other, without any comprehension, [...] a dialogue among the deaf»¹⁹. Comprehending another country is especially true of those historical comparisons which are confined to one or two other countries with a high standard of contextualisation. Immersion in the research of another country often leads to a revised view and understanding of the history of one's own. In this way, historical comparison

¹⁸ M. Werner, B. Zimmermann, *Beyond Comparison. Histoire Croisée and the Challenge of Reflexivity*, in «History and Theory», 45 (2006), pp. 30-50.

¹⁹ M. Bloch, *Pour une histoire comparée des sociétés européennes*, p. 49.

does not simply lead to a construction, but often also to a deconstruction of a locality, a nation or a region. Hence understanding the other and redefining the self is a major impetus of historical comparison. This cognitive process is similar to that found in the history of transfers, which can deconstruct a nation, showing that many ideas, terms, commodities or persons that are seen as a crucial part of a national culture in fact came from outside.

2. A second trench tends to be seen between historical comparison, which seeks to compare two national cases, and transfer studies which observe the flows and links between countries. Again, this is an oversimplifying caricature. As has been said before, complete historical comparison should not look only for differences, but also explore points in common. It also cannot neglect interconnections, even if it does not always explore them with the same intensity of archival work. At the same time, a complete history of transfers cannot totally neglect differences between the society of departure and the society of arrival of transfers. Hence, most transfer studies are related to geographic entities, nations, regions, localities, or civilisations or continents. This is also true of most articles in the Palgrave dictionary of transnational history. One should also not forget that the most important initial contribution to the history of transfers came from specialists in transfers between two nations, between France and Germany, in the case of Michel Espagne and Michael Werner²⁰. So, the difference between historical comparison and historical transfer studies is not a deep trench in the use of totally different geographical units, but a difference of accentuation in use of the same units.

3. A third important trench is seen in hybridization, *métissage* (Serge Gruzinski), a cultural innovation which adheres neither to the country of departure nor to the culture of arrival of transfers and which is grasped only by the study of the history of transfers, not by historical comparison.²¹ To give an example: one can argue that only transfer history will recognize how the modern welfare state, which was first introduced by the Bismarck government in Germany, became a hybrid international concept under the influence of the Ilo dominated by French experts in the interwar period, and after World War II was taken as a standard model for many countries. This transfer would not be grasped by historical comparison, which normally stresses the national Bismarck continuities of German social policies. However, what historical comparisons might see are the consequences of hybridization, the convergence of the European welfare states, which also include the German welfare state. Once again transnational history and historical comparison do not stand in opposition to each other, but complement one another in a hybrid method.

4. Finally transnational history, like historical comparison, faces traps and perils which the historian needs to recognize and try to overcome. It is true, comparative history does not simply enlighten and improve the understanding of the other. Like all methods, it has also its shortcomings and errors. Comparisons of entire nations often underestimate the internal differences within nations and hence construct and overestimate national differences. Comparisons might also start from untranslatable national terms and end up in dead ends when applying them

²⁰ M. Espagne, M. Werner, (eds.), *Transferts. Les relations interculturelles dans l'espace franco-allemand (XVIIIe et XIXe siècle)*, Paris, PUF, 1988.

²¹ S. Gruzinski, *Les quatre parties du monde. Histoire d'une mondialisation*, Paris, La Martinière, 2004.

in comparison. The erroneous application of the English or German term of university to 19th century France has been mentioned frequently. The main danger: comparisons of nations can be used to corroborate national prejudices and conduct nationalistic propaganda. But the same is true of the history of transfers with its flows of men, ideas and commodities. A history inspired by the positive impact of international flows and transfers might not take into account or might misunderstand the rejection of transfers as blind parochialism and might misinterpret enforced and imposed transfers. History of transfers has also been misused by governments. One known example is the so-called «Westforschung» (research on Western Europe), established by the Nazi regime especially during World War II, which set out to demonstrate the history of Germanic transfers into what is now France during the middle ages. Reflections on political dangers and scientific fallacies are necessary for all historical methods, for historical comparison as well as for historical studies of transfers.

Summary

The main argument of this article is that it does not make sense artificially to separate historical comparison from the investigation of flows and transfers between countries. They are both based on the same motivation: writing history that extends beyond the nation State. Neither of them fully give up the nation State as an object of research, but they do not depend on it. Both approaches need to be combined in a complete transnational study. Historical comparison should not be done without exploring flows and interconnections. At the same time the study of flows and interconnections cannot be done fully without investigating differences and similarities. The larger public is interested in both approaches. It will not understand why differences or flows ought to be excluded. Hence a comprehensive notion of transnational history ought to include comparative methods as well as the study of interconnections²².

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²² For a similar view: M. Pernau, *Transnationale Geschichte*, Goettingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2011, pp. 53 ff.; H.-G. Haupt, J. Kocka, *Comparison and Beyond*, in Id., (eds.), *Comparative and Transnational History: Central European Approaches and New Perspectives*, New York-Oxford, Berghahn Books, 2009, pp. 18 ff.; J. Paulmann, *Internationaler Vergleich und interkultureller Transfer. Zwei Forschungsansätze zur europäischen Geschichte des 18. bis 20. Jahrhunderts*, in «Historische Zeitschrift», 267 (1998), pp. 649-685; in a special way: P.Y. Saunier, *Transnational History*, cit., p. 11.