

***From Comparative to Global History:
Assessing Relational Approaches
to the Past***

Foreword

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In 1928, Marc Bloch made what proved to be an influential statement when he said that the practice of comparing societies distant in space and time, described rather disparagingly as ‘comparative method in the grand manner,’ may serve some ends but is too imprecise to be of any great use ‘from the scientific point of view.’ Decades later William H. Sewell, Jr. objected that ‘mere temporal and spatial proximity does not assure similarity, and some societies which are very remote from one another are surely more alike, at least in ways that are crucial for some explanatory problems, than some neighboring societies.’

Themes such as ‘global history,’ ‘Transfersgeschichte,’ ‘circulation,’ and ‘connection’ all hold an undoubted appeal in the present age. It has been pointed out though that all too often the history of the world, especially when it is based to a large degree on (mostly English) secondary literature, has ended up being fashioned into a flat narrative of ‘the rise of the West and the Westernization of the rest.’ For Sanjay Subrahmanyam, an alternative to the ‘grand narrative of modernization’ would be for historians not simply to adopt a different scale, but to take a step sideways, finding a different vantage point and employing a decentering technique to identify previously hidden or unseen connections among places and cultures.

More recent comparative endeavours have seen scholars engaging more and more with what Serge Gruzinski has described as the ‘alchemy of hybridization,’ and the ‘intensity of circulation ... that reveals mixed landscapes.’ Entangled histories (Espagne, Kocka, Werner, Zimmermann) have explored ‘mutual influencing,’ ‘reciprocal or asymmetric perceptions,’ and the intertwined ‘processes of constituting one another.’ Further efforts to restore cultural comparison to the centre of scholarship have included the ‘cognitive science of religion,’ ‘World Literature,’ and ‘World Philology’. Finally, but no less importantly, historians of emotions have begun to investigate and to problematize the transcultural translatability of emotions.

The contributors to this issue of CROMOHS (21/2017-2018) offer a critical historiographical survey and discussion, accompanied by exemplary case studies, of the

various approaches to comparative early modern history that have been theorized and practiced over the past two decades. These range from transcultural and translation studies to global and connected histories. The aim is to unravel, review, and compare the possibilities and limitations of this plurality of relational approaches and methods. Has a change of scale been taking place, or a shift in perspective instead? What are the consequences of pursuing a practice of synchronic or diachronic comparison? How can researchers working with languages, concepts, and categories that are not part of their sphere of socialization deal with the inescapable challenges of reflexivity that these pose?

The issue opens with two stimulating theoretical essays, respectively by Margrit Pernau & Luc Wodzicki and by Henning Trüper. It also includes a themed section, edited by Giulia Calvi, focussing on the circulation of people and objects across South Eastern Europe and the Ottoman Empire between the 17th and the 19th century. Finally, it features Daniel Barbu's compelling interview with Sanjay Subrahmanyam, and Ann Thomson's reflections on recent publications in Global Intellectual History.

The publication of issue 21/2017-2018 of CROMOHS marks the start of a new season in the life of the journal, under the joint editorship of Daniel Barbu (Historiography of Religious Studies, CNRS Paris), Caterina Bori (History of Pre-Modern Islam and Muslim Civilisation), Giovanni Tarantino (Early Modern Intellectual History, University of Florence) and Paola von Wyss-Giacosa (Visual Anthropology and Material Culture Studies, University of Zurich). As of the next issue, CROMOHS will resume its customary annual publication.