Comparison and History

Europe in Cross-National Perspective

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Historians are notoriously resistant to comparisons. Despite nods in the direction of comparison, the profession remains organized by national field. Historical methodology emphasizes the uniqueness of its subjects, explaining their development by presenting a narrative of their evolution. It implicitly assumes that by saying what, step by step, we have also accounted for why. Experts in particular areas, the products of the study it took to master a field in all its glorious singularity, historians traditionally have preferred being specialists, as the joke has it, who eventually knew everything about nothing, rather than generalists, knowing nothing about everything. Comparative studies, as Sylvia Thrupp noted apologetically in 1958, introducing the then fledgling journal, *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, threatened to undermine the historian’s craft skills and to turn historians into jacks of all trades.\(^1\) Comparative historians commonly find that they are read much more appreciatively by sociologists and political scientists than by their more immediate colleagues.

Comparisons are often seen as but one step from generalizations and generalizations, in turn, as the province of the hard social sciences, not of particularizing historians. Outfitting the historian’s toolbox with
generalizations, it is feared, would be to accept the challenge thrown out by the philosopher Carl Hempel as he sought to clasp history in the embrace of the hard sciences based on covering-law models. In his view, explanation and prediction were logically equivalent acts, merely extending in different directions temporally. The singular could never be understood except as an instance of a generality. History, the historian will argue in rejecting such approaches, deals not with reproducible results nor with laws that hold true of all societies at all times, but with the temporally unique, the particular context, the unprecedented confluence of circumstances.

Of course, the same could be said of literature, or law, or religion, all of which are the subjects of flourishing comparative studies. If anything, indeed, the claim of uniqueness could be made more validly in these cases than for much of what the historian studies. Most nations, after all, have developed a tax system, most have had a peasantry, and most an industrial proletariat, but not every culture, to stick with literature for the moment, writes sonnets or haiku or essays. So why should the former be incomparable while the latter are? Why should scholars of literature have embraced the idea of comparison so fervently that there are now departments of comparative literature—often the most prestigious and methodologically sophisticated of such endeavors—while individual students of comparative history still suffer under the prejudices of their colleagues? (Let us, in contrast, not stop to ask why there are Departments of Romance, Germanic, Slavic, etc. literature, but no similar subdivisions of history. That way lies madness. Is it the insularity of traditional literary studies that forces the need for separate institutionalization of comparisons, while historians have built at least the possibility, if not the reality, of comparison into their nationally mongrel departments?)

Indeed, the only good stories about comparison come from the literary scholars. Renato Poggioli, for many years a professor of comparative literature at Harvard and author of *The Theory of the Avant-Garde* and other books, was once at a party with a society dame of Cambridge. Upon being introduced, she gushed to him, “Professor Poggioli, I understand that you study comparative literature. Tell me, please, to what do you compare literature.” His response, so the story, is unprintable. Another comes from a dream once had by the noted professor of English literature, Hugh Kenner: the bell rings early on a bright morning, his wife descends the stairs, opens the door. There before her stand René Wellek, professor of comparative literature at Yale, and Harry Levin, professor of comparative literature at Harvard.
She turns and calls up to her husband, still in bed, "Wake up dear, the men are here to compare literature." We historians do not have any stories because we hardly have comparisons yet, not to mention the fun and jollity that comes with them.

We resist generalizations because we regard them as inherently untrue to the particularity of the past. We reject Occam's principle of parsimoniousness, basic to the harder sciences and their forms of explanation, and welcome multiplicity, overdetermination, and complexity. We are inherently postmodern, and were so long before that concept was ever invented, in rejecting master narratives and universality, the one-size-fits-all of Enlightenment dogma. We are by profession historian in Ranke's sense, seeing the past as unique and inexplicable except by particularist understanding. We reject overly dogmatic applications of universal principles to explain the past, whether Gibbon's Enlightenment attempts to see Romans as Englishmen in togas, and both as exemplars of abstract humanity, gussed up with a bit of historical trapping for temporally local color, or the dogmatic Marxist attempt to find class struggle in every altercation. Rational choice theory is perhaps one of the last few remaining hopes of finding an underlying logic of historical development that in theory applies everywhere at all times. With only a few lonely and (curiously) largely Scandinavian practitioners, however, this is hardly a booming business.4

And yet comparisons, or at least the claim that they ought to be practiced, remain stubbornly with us, however much more they are honored in the breach than the practice. Why? For one thing, national histories are going the way of nationalism and nations. As the constructed nature of national identity becomes an increasingly accepted dogma, it is obvious that the historical aspect of nationalist ideology, the primacy of national histories, must also fall by the wayside. Just because Bismarck was kleindeutsch, must modern-day historians also be? Merrily treating Bavaria and Prussia as part of the same thing, but excluding Austria? Content with a reference to Schnabel's Badenese approach to Germany, but otherwise treating it as a largely undiversified Brei? Why should Scandinavia be treated as separate national histories, as it remains to this day, with national rivalries as fierce and unforgiving as anywhere, if Britain is often not? The focus has gradually shifted from nations, with clearly delineated boundaries and allegedly homogeneous interiors, to the tense interactions between them, the borderlands and their peculiar dynamics.5 Or to the gradually emerging study of regions in preference to nations.6 Now that the individual as a unified, coherent, isolated subject has
been dispatched, should it prove hard to drive a stake through the heart of the nation?

But such an enlargement and enfuzzification of historical focus, however welcome, does not necessarily imply an interest in comparison. Indeed, quite the opposite may be true. By enlarging the scope, taking the region and not the nation as the given to be studied, comparisons that were earlier possible—in theory at least—are now subsumed in a larger and higher entity and thus undercut. If general statements are made about Central Europe, then comparisons between, say, Prussia and Austria are either undermined or at best turned into internal juxtapositions between entities no longer regarded as the primary objects of attention. We get big and bigger history, but not necessarily comparative history. On the other hand, if the regions are subnational, then comparisons are possible within what was formerly regarded as a monolithic country. Much recent German historiography has broken loose of Prussian domination in this respect. Reunification has focused attention both on past regional divisions and on more recently created ones. The notorious reluctance of American historians to regard their country in internationally comparative perspective is to some degree counterbalanced, at least in terms of gaining methodological experience, by an increasing willingness to undertake regionally based comparisons within the nation.

Embraced in theory, shunned in practice, comparative history leads a shadowy existence. Few deny at least some of its virtues, but even fewer set them in practice.

Comparisons have helped undermine the smug assumptions made by national histories. At least the non-French will smirk when recalling the way that R.R. Palmer was damned forty years ago for having dared to dilute the uniqueness of the French Revolution into the western brew of the Democratic Revolution. Today, it is Mona Ozouf who goes to great lengths to defend the uniqueness of French feminism against the comparativists, especially those who draw unflattering conclusions about its development. In certain cases, comparisons have opened up whole fields of investigation. The study of slavery and racial difference was rejuvenated by examinations of Latin and South America and the sharp differences they uncovered between the southern and northern (both European and American) approaches to ethnic intermixture, definitions of race and slavery. The Sonderweg debate has offered a bracing tonic that raises basic questions of whether national uniqueness exists at all.
The peculiarities of X argument is increasingly, and justly, seen as a cheap escape, a desire to avoid reading the wider literature, a penchant for eternally reinventing the wheel, a sign of intellectual laziness. Yet, while the peculiarities of German history may be moribund, exceptionalism still thrives among historians of Scandinavia, allergic as they are to comparisons with that obvious example, Germany—culturally so closely related, politically so damnable. Peculicity arguments also remain healthy among American historians. Daniel Rodgers, for example, can enlighten with a massive tome demonstrating how policy makers in the United States participated in a larger transatlantic reformist discussion—surprising perhaps to American historians in their splendid insularity, but rather thinner beer to others. Though in all fairness, exceptions are becoming more common and the oft-remarked uncomparative nature of American historiography must be put in the perspective of an immense nation with regional variations as wide as those found within the European subcontinent. Moreover, as mentioned, some of the comparative impetus within American history has found fulfillment in inter-American studies.

Few things are as annoying to the comparative imagination as the national history that invokes general causes as though they explain particular national outcomes. Jill Harsin’s book on prostitution in France, for example, argues that the French stood out by imposing a draconian system of regulations on the merchants of venery because women had but low status there. Her assumption that women were worse off than in nations—Switzerland or England, say—less inclined to regulate, may, of course, be true. But without a comparative argument to that effect, this cause cannot possibly account for the particular outcome it is invoked to explain. Ann La BERGE claims that the French lagged behind the British in terms of public health because of factors that include the vested interests of garbage collectors, ragpickers, and the like in the sanitary old regime; the huge cost of investments in infrastructure; and the conviction that there was money to be made supplying solid waste as fertilizer. All of these were, no doubt, concerns, but ones that, as far as the argument is presented, held equally in England, or other nations, and thus explain nothing about the peculiarities of the French case. A comparative question is posed, but answered in an uncomparative manner.

Such comparisons call into question the basic premises of any national history, showing that none can be isolated from others in glorious solitude, that comparison is inevitably part of any Fragestellung, however blinkeredly national. Is X peculiar? Compared
to what? The assertion of singularity obviously and trivially poses a comparative question. Sociologists, as Hinze put it in an overly neat juxtaposition, compare to find the general features shared by the matters studied, historians, in contrast, to discover what it is that makes their topic singular.\(^{16}\)

Comparisons are often used in political battles. The Comintern theory of fascism as the highest stage of capitalism sought to blame by association. Tit for tat, the theory of totalitarianism returned the comparative innuendo, lumping fascism and communism together as essentially similar despite their pretensions to ideological opposition. The controversies provoked by the *Historikerstreit*, the debate over whether Hitler’s attack on the Soviet Union was preventive, and the *Black Book of Communism* were all extensions of this campaign of reciprocal smear by comparison.\(^{17}\) Less obviously, but nonetheless politically driven, the assertion of Scandinavian peculiarity stems from assumptions of Nordic moral superiority commonly drawn in these nations. The revelations of forced sterilization and other eugenic barbarities inflicted during the interwar years posed a special dilemma, not because what took place was out of the ordinary compared to other nations, but precisely because, in this case, the Swedes mistakenly regarded themselves as superior and blameless in such respects.\(^{18}\) To take a less charged example, the highly developed welfare state of Sweden is the base of that nation’s claim to pride of place at the pinnacle of social policy development. In the welfare whiggery of a Social Democratic reading of history, Sweden ranks at the summit, other nations being relegated to less heady altitudes along this Marshallian progression towards the embodiment of social rights. But if, instead of taking only western — indeed northwestern — Europe (with occasional allusions to North America thrown in for salutary lessons on the price of straying from the narrow path of virtue), the scope is broadened globally, matters Scandinavian appear in a different light. They now seem less as the precocious attainment of an inevitable ideal towards which all others are striving and more as the peculiar, insular, and localized development of a small niche, happy in its well-upholstered obscurity, but hardly indicative (as Richard Rose has argued) of the possibilities or indeed even ambitions of the rest of the globe.\(^{19}\)

All history, however hermetically limited to one nation, is comparative in this inherent sense that the very implication of uniqueness presupposes a measuring stick formed from the experiences of other countries. But there is more. Most contemporary historiography takes as its starting point the radical otherness and difference of the past.
History has reemphasized its historicist roots by treating the past as a different country, highlighting the discontinuities and breaks between us and our predecessors. It no longer assumes that they were much like us, set perhaps against a backdrop of technologically less evolved circumstances. History is, in this sense, temporally comparative, between the present and the past. This is a less trivial point than it may seem at first inspection. The older social science paradigms of history, with roots in the Enlightenment’s Cartesian belief in the universality and invariability of human nature, along with their continuation in rational choice theory applied to the past, assume that there are broad constants that hold across time: that humans are rational interest maximizers, that differential position in the productive system leads to conflicts between groups, and so forth.

The cultural turn in history, and the radical neohistoricism it has helped foster as the profession’s fundamental methodological dogma, in contrast, tends to emphasize the uniqueness and difference of each era, seeking to understand it on its own terms. The basic assumption is that things change dramatically; the weakness of this approach has come in explaining why things change at all. Hence the rather tepid conclusion that studies written in this vein often come to, namely that the past is different, *tout court*. This temporal comparison is not the usual way the word is used, but it does introduce a note of comparison into history that otherwise seems to reject such premises. The battle of interpretation between Norbert Elias and Hans Peter Duerr, for example, over whether or not human nature changed radically during the early modern period, turns on the conclusions drawn from such a temporally comparative argument.

Many comparisons attempt to dismantle a formerly accepted standard. The *Sonderweg* debate questions why the experience of France and Britain should be seen as normative and deviations from this high road therefore explained. Historians of Britain have for long wondered whether the reason political histories took France, with its revolution, as the standard was simply that spectacle is spectacular as quiet reformist change is not. When Behrens posed the same question in her comparison of Prussia and France, the answer must have seemed perverse to the French point of view. According to her, the Prussians managed successfully most of the changes in administrative and governmental prowess required to avoid revolution while the French failed miserably. The Revolution, so the implication, was not the glorious culmination of strivings for change and betterment, but the expression of a developmental pathology. The standard had been reversed.
Similarly, one could take the development of the American labor movement as the baseline against which the violence and confrontation of similar developments in Continental Europe should be judged. Or one could, as Sombart did, take the German case as the standard against which the lack of socialism in the United States must be explained. The choice makes, of course, for quite different Fragestellungen. In examining the comparative development of welfare states, Rose’s deliberate provocation (mentioned earlier) poses the question in reverse of its usual formulation: not why did the United States and most of the world not follow the example of well-developed social policy blazed in northern Europe, but conversely, why should this obscure nook of the world be considered the standard against which the geopolitically more important nations of the new world and Asia are to be measured? Who’s the deviant here?

Fundamental to the fear of comparison lies the question of generalizations, covering laws and their relationship to historical explanation. Must comparison involve generalization and must it therefore raise the hackles of historians who fear the incursion of inapplicable explanatory paradigms? In the first place, studying the history of more than one nation does not necessarily involve comparison, much less generalization. Some histories are broad rather than comparative. When Arno Mayer set out to investigate the persistence of the aristocracy into the modern world, he could have limited himself to one nation or the other. Instead he ran through the same scenario across a broad gamut of countries and could thus claim to be speaking about the old regime in Europe as a whole.22 But rather than comparing, he added and accreted layers of pigment on top of the other, giving a deeper luster than one coat, but not fundamentally changing the hue. This is repetitive, not comparative, history, the argument inflated but not extended by the comparisons. Main Currents of X is a broad, but not necessarily comparative topic. Broad history is best practiced in certain fields. The history of medicine, for example, sports especially well-executed examples. Its topic typically concerns an activity that is clearly delineated, with manageable materials and relatively few subjects, where broad, international contacts were common. Hence expansive surveys of a particular theme across a wide range of nations can be accomplished more easily than were the subject, say, the labor movement.23

Most often, historical comparisons pause along the path leading from one national history to abstract sociological generalizations, arrested by what we may call the typologizing temptation: X countries, X number of variations on a theme, paths to a particular goal, varieties of a phenomenon. Barrington Moore gave us three routes to modernity
and thus showed that the inherited unilinear highway of modernization was not the only one that could be followed. Thomas Ertman gave us a multiplicity of paths to statehood, Louis Hartz various means of new world settlement. Charles Maier and Gregory Luebbert approaches to the crises of the interwar years, Rogers Brubaker conceptions of citizenship, and so it goes.24 Studies of the evolution of the welfare state are rife, some would say overripe, with typologies. Careers have been made by trying to become the Linnaeus of social policy.25 Similarly, scholars of fascism have spent disproportionate energy on categorizations and typologies. On the other side of the political spectrum we are content to have Main Currents of Marxism and could equally well have main currents of socialism, communism, or any permutation thereof. Partly, this has to do with variations on a theme in an ideology with common touchstones to which all, at whatever removes, refer back. Equally, it concerns the self-professed internationalism of the movement(s). With fascism, in contrast, there is a fundamental contradiction at the heart of any comparison of antagonistic nationalisms, each seeking to distinguish itself from others, indeed to fight them with all possible means. What could be the common denominator here, other than the fact of difference? Hence we have attempts either to soar into the stratosphere, as with Nolte’s fascist essentialism as resistance to transcendence, or Sternhell’s hope of getting to the core of the movement in his argument that it partook of both left and right, Enlightenment and reaction. Or, we get shopping lists of characteristics, as with Payne’s fascist minimum. This is a sort of mix-and-match approach that argues, much as when ordering at a Chinese restaurant, that since it’s all fascism on the menu, so long as you’ve been through enough from the various possibilities to be satiated, you’ve had a meal.26

Such typological approaches seek to lay out the different ways a topic could be and was dealt with, without necessarily insisting on inducing broad laws that hold in all cases. The difference between Barrington Moore, on the one hand, and Theda Skocpol or Jack Goldstone, on the other, lies at the point where typologies strain to become generalizations. Moore rests content with having destroyed the unilinear approach to political and social modernization with a more variegated set of alternative routes. His sociological colleagues, in contrast, seek to uncover the general laws governing the breakdown of states and the outbreak of revolutions. Social scientists, at their most ambitious, search, like the hard scientists of their emulatory ambitions, to uncover general laws hiding in the fragments of particularity. Even
Goldstone, who claims to be seeking “robust processes” rather than Hempelian laws, phrases his results in terms that are all but indistinguishable from generalizations: that “revolution is likely to occur” when a society simultaneously experiences three sorts of crises whose details need not detain us here.

It is at this point, when comparisons strive for generalization in their ambition to extrapolate allegedly universal laws, that historians bristle. Generalizations based on a limited number of cases often are just conclusions about those, convinced that they are arrayed in the finery of universality, yet traipsing about, like Hans Christian Andersen’s emperor, in their underwear. From a historian’s point of view, they do not add anything substantive by being phrased in generalities. Indeed, if anything, they lose by dilution. Juan Linz developed the insight that the ideological polymorphousness of fascist ideology stems from its tactical positioning as a latecomer ideology. It was required to seek support where it could find it and thus to appeal, often in mutually contradictory fashion, to various and variegated social groups. This is the sort of fruit of a broad study of several European nations that comparativists aspire to. But his more specific conclusion, phrased needlessly in the terminology of social science, that “wherever a communist or soviet type revolutionary attempt was made and wherever the socialist parties embraced a maximalist ideology rather than a social democratic one, fascism in one or another version was more likely to emerge” does not recognizably tell us much that a potted summary of events in Germany and Italy would fail to.

Ted Robert Gurr, in a classic case of social science run amok, analyzes political violence, including revolutions, guerrilla wars, coups d’état, rebellions, and riots, at a high level of abstraction and comes to conclusions such as these: that “the greater the frustration, the greater the quantity of aggression against the source of frustration,” or that the more the deprivation, the more people are likely to act against it. It was an approach of such generality that it prompted Philip Abrams to remark that it blurred the distinction between idiocy and analysis. In a similar way, do we need world-renowned social scientists to tell us that diseases affecting all are likely to attract more funding in hopes of a solution than those that afflict only (despised) minorities? Or what does a historian make of Charles Tilly’s worry whether the influence of the Reformation on distinguishing Spain from Prussia was merely a “minor distinction” or an “idiosyncratic” characteristic of Western European development that hindered hopes of drawing general lessons on the development of the modern state from the European past? A
salutary warning of the perils of generalization is offered by what is clearly intended as praise, but which no historian could accept as other than intellectual interment by trivialization. As Mary Douglas, Richard Mohr blithely assures us, sums up the main finding of her lifework, “Solidarity is only gesturing when it involves no sacrifice.”33 A lifetime of scholarship and you end up sounding like a fortune cookie. In defense of such lofty altitudes, however, it must be said that a book on Newtonian gravity entitled Why Things Fall Down would take a similar approach and that, if aiming to uncover the most fundamental processes, we must be prepared to tackle issues at a level that, while mysterious until discovered, will seem trivial once apparent to all. The question remains whether historians should or can have ambitions to be Newtonian.

But comparison does not necessarily mean generalization. Indeed, in the hands of historians, it should never do so. One of the most common operations of comparative history is to test and — usually — to undercut the validity of generalizations formulated by the harder social sciences. Jürgen Kocka’s book on the political inclinations of white-collar employees in Germany and the United States was written to test the generalization, put forth most famously by Seymour Martin Lipset, that, as an ideology of appeal to such groups, fascism was an “extremism of the middle.” Since American Angestellten did not fall for the siren song of the far right that so enchanted their German colleagues, there must (so Kocka’s conclusion) have been something other than white-collar status that explains this outcome.34 May not historians ask, however, why it should be their task to spend long years disproving ideas thought up by sociologists in their baths? Do historians want to be the empirical foot soldiers commanded about by a bunch of sociological colonels?

The most effective comparative histories are those which, eschewing generalizations, formulate arguments at a middle range about differences and similarities among a range of cases that allow us to understand the general issue at hand (World War One, say, but not necessarily in this or that nation) better than had we limited our scope to one country only. At a minimum, good comparative histories should give insights into each particular case that would have remained unrevealed had they been studied in isolation. They juxtapose in order to isolate what is crucial, which is to say causal, and distinguish it from what may be only incidental in any given national context. My own work on the political and social origins of the European welfare state argued that the emphasis on the working class and its political
representatives that derived from a Scandinavian focus did not hold up when subjected to comparative scrutiny. Social policy of a solidaristic bent was supported also by parties of the center and right in the Nordic countries, as well as in other nations, Germany and France above all. The broader the geographic perspective, the looser is the couplet between the working class and solidaristic social policy.\textsuperscript{35}

Methodologically similar was my attempt to isolate the factors determining the style of public health adopted across European nations during the nineteenth century. It was not so much the political culture of a nation that was reflected in its public health tactics, since nations quite different in this respect shared similar approaches to disease. Rather, so the conclusion, it was the geographic positioning that countries found themselves in during the crucially formative period of the early nineteenth century vis-à-vis epidemic disease that dictated which preventive tactics made sense. Geography, not politics, was the motor.\textsuperscript{36} Morillo’s comparison between the early modern military revolution in Europe and Japan allowed him to argue that the historically important factor was not technical changes as such (gunpowder weaponry and the shift of power to the infantry), but the broader social developments that allowed such novelties to have an effect. Only through a comparison with Japan, where the purely technological changes did not have the effect supposed for them in Europe, could the argument that in Europe, too, technology was not destiny, be sustained.\textsuperscript{37}

The pitch and level of the comparison is crucial in this respect. Comparisons that deal with a broad variety of nations are most likely to arrive at universal conclusions or to formulate ones of such a generality and vagueness that their value will strike most historians as dubious, trivial, or both. Plethora is the mother of platitude, as Barrington Moore observed in gist.\textsuperscript{38} Where Quincy Wright, in his massive transnational study of war, felt obliged to classify collisions of stars as one form of war and to begin with a discussion of fighting between animals, historians will be tempted to think that while a running start is needed, to begin so far before the starting line calls into question the stamina needed to arrive at the finish.\textsuperscript{39} Where Orlando Patterson approached slavery around the globe for its entire recorded history and concluded that the only thing shared by all forms (some with no racial or color differences, some with no necessary connection to forced labor, some not deprived of legal personality, and so forth) was the violent domination of natally alienated and generally dishonored persons who thus suffer social death, historians interested in empirical muck might justifiably conclude that at this level of
abstraction the air is simply too rarified. When Ernst Nolte sought to define the core and essence of fascism everywhere always, the answer was a resistance to transcendence. He thus turned what most would regard as a political movement, possibly with significant cultural overtones, into something bordering on theology. At such ethereal levels, what are the questions to be answered?

Much of what bothers historians about generalizations at this altitude is what exactly they are after. Generalizations that seek the essence of the matter in vitro, such as Nolte’s definition of fascism or Patterson’s of slavery, attempt Platonically to construct an ideal form of what exists only in imperfect fragments on Earth. If so, then what is the relationship between the ideal form—generic fascism, say—and the really existing fascisms of history? The real ones will only partly embody the essential attributes identified in the ideal form, becoming thus examples of something “higher.” Generic fascism has never existed and the question is what purpose such a construct serves. What more do we know about any actual fascism by constructing an ideal type? In the case of Nazi Germany or Italy under Mussolini, probably very little. But perhaps we do, in fact, gain knowledge through an analysis which argues that, compared to the generic measuring rod, Franco was not a fascist but Idi Amin was. It is conceivable that the generic concept would allow us to detect regularities among current political movements that might otherwise escape notice. While not actually gaining more empirical knowledge of any individual cases, we would know more about them in a conceptual sense, to the extent that we now recognized them as members of a larger class of events.

On the other hand, the relationship between the individual cases and the general one is problematic. What is there about fascism, to stick with a difficult example, that makes formulation of a generic version so difficult? Are Italy and Germany during the interwar years simply too different to fit into the same definition? If fascism is defined as an economically modernizing movement, some have claimed that Nazi Germany would have to be cut. But, conversely, if fascism is modernizing, then Italy fits, and so, in this view of seeing things, do Cuba, Vietnam, Nasser’s Egypt, and a slew of other nations that no one but a political scientist with a stepmotherly approach to the past would want to lump together as fascist. Focusing overly sharply on economic modernization thus gives us a general category that includes the wrong nations. The task at hand is to settle on common criteria that apply to both interwar Italy and Germany. But, if so, then have we not inverted cart and horse? How do we know that
Germany and Italy are the fascist nations whose core and essential commonalities are those we wish to alembicate?

If the social sciences are Platonic in their search for essences and ideal forms that explain the commonality of phenomena that in other respects are different, historians are Wittgensteinians. They are content to point out family resemblances among phenomena that are related, without thereby invoking any particular Smithness to account for that charmingly lopsided grin sported by so many of the really existing Smiths, while also not denying family membership to those with straight mouths. Comparative historical arguments, at their best, are made in the interstices of their empirical foundations; they emerge from the interplay of different national or other cases. This is what distinguishes a comparative argument from Arno Mayer's. His is additive: there is no interplay between the cases, there is no reason to read the others once you have read one, since they add nothing new, only repeating the same argument for each subsequent national case. Imagine standard uncomparative historical narratives as like the Washington Monument: monolithic, unipedestal. Let us think of comparative arguments as like the Eiffel Tower, resting on multiple feet without which it could not stand, but with the tower as something other than the sum of its foundations.

Take, as an example, the difference between the standard-issue Sonderweg view of German historical development, phrased classically by Ralf Dahrendorf, and the attempts to dethrone it, given a major boost twenty years ago in the salutary provocations of Eley and Blackbourn. In the former, Germany is amalgamated to a standard case, the evolution of liberal bourgeois industrial democracy. This occurred either peacefully, as in Britain, or with a revolution thrown in, as in France. Ultimately, however, it rests on a social science view of modernization, its allegedly inevitable stages and coherences. Having failed to achieve a bourgeois revolution, Germany is classified as a failed or at best belated development, Bloch's ponderous Gleichzeitigkeit des Ungleichzeitigen. The generalization renounces its bastard child.

In the hands of the anti-Sonderwegians, in contrast, the generalized verities have dissipated. No implicit standard of development exemplified in the trajectory of any one or two nations lies at the heart of comparative judgments. Each nation is seen as moving in its own direction at its own pace, with the similarities among them banished to the realm of far greater abstraction: industrialization, but in very different ways and timing; the gradual assertion of preeminence by the bourgeoisie, but often in ways that to the old view would appear covert,
subterranean, or even examples of false consciousness. Formal political democracy, formerly the crux of the matter, now becomes an optional appurtenance whose presence or absence can equally be reconciled with bourgeois interests and their achievement. We have a bouquet of flowers, all of the same genus, though perhaps not phylum, dazzling in their complementarity rather than their similarity. We have a bouquet and no longer — stretching the horticultural analogies — a tree, with its singular trunk and massed branches.

Here are a few examples of comparative mid-level historical arguments that fall shy of any ambitions to generalize. These are good arguments, not necessarily in the sense that they are accurate or right, but in that they compare and juxtapose different cases in an attempt to isolate what it is that is unique, crucial and therefore causal to some of them. Why did the German, Austrian, and British medical research communities contribute more to a scientific understanding of homosexuality than the French during the nineteenth century, even though the French were the nation of Pasteur and the proud inheritors of a venerable and distinguished tradition of scientific prowess in matters medical? The northern movements in favor of homosexual rights arose as ones concerned to prove their scientific mettle in part because homosexuality remained criminalized in these nations, where in France the Napoleonic Code had no penalties for sodomy. The hope was, by invoking the appropriate academic credentials, to lend an air of respectability to a political cause that, to the south, did not need to be fought.\textsuperscript{43}

Similar is the argument that emerges from Richard Evans’s comparison of the evolution of feminist movements across a broad range of nations: that the delay of the Australasian women’s movement may be explained in that many of the reforms, around whose achievement organizations were formed in other nations, had already been granted here.\textsuperscript{44} Both of these arguments harken back to the structure of the argument presented in Sombart’s classic explanation of why the socialist dog did not bark in the United States. In all these cases, such conclusions, telling us both something of the dynamics of political organization across nations and the particular trajectory of developments in specific instances, would not have been apparent from a study of individual circumstances. They emerge precisely from the juxtaposition with others, both similar and different in various respects. Seymour Martin Lipset’s comparison between the United States and Canada also comes close to this ideal, using the two as equally posed counterpoints to illustrate what it is in American developments that cannot be attributed to new worldishness, expansive geography or other features that are equally shared with Canada.\textsuperscript{45}
Or take one of the best examples of comparative history, Peter Kolchin’s study of American slavery and Russian serfdom. There are general conclusions in the book, mainly in the form of confirmation or negation of generalizations advanced by others: that race was not a biological given, but socially constructed, as seen in the way that serfs were eventually treated as a race apart on the basis of their legal status; that forced labor systems arose in response to the demand for agricultural goods in Europe and a shortage of labor in the peripheral food-producing nations; that egalitarian societies generally had a harder time emancipating slaves than did stratified, authoritarian ones. And yet, the genius of the book lies in the juxtaposition of its two cases and the way that each is illuminated and enriched by the comparison, fruits whose juice cannot be squeezed in a sentence or two. Tellingly, there is no concluding chapter where the results of induction are served up; the nuggets are embedded along the way in the narrative empirical chapters.

One such mini-conclusion deals with why revolts in Russia tended to be large-scale violent uprisings (huge units, absentee landlords, majority of the population serfs, largely autonomous daily serf life) while in the United States they were smaller (the opposite of the factors mentioned in the other case). This allows Kolchin to dispute accounts of the relative paucity of slave revolts in the United States that rely on factors like an alleged Sambo mentality among slaves that encouraged docility. While it would, in principle, have been possible to account accurately for, say, the unrebellious nature of American slaves without a comparison to Russia, in practice the likelihood of being able to identify which factors set the American situation apart from another where, in fact, rebellions were frequent and large, would seem almost impossible—much like searching the proverbial haystack without even knowing whether we were looking for needles or toothpicks or matches. The Russian case with its obverse set of circumstances is what allows identification of the possible causes in the American situation, a classic instance of Mill’s method of difference.

The contrast of this sort of mid-level, historical, empirically based comparison with the supersonic altitude of Patterson’s approach is striking. Where Patterson would scarcely have registered the differences between serfdom and slavery, except to note perhaps that these two examples showed the extent to which, sub specie aeternitas, race has little if anything to do with slavery, it is precisely the differences that are important for Kolchin. A similar, although less successful, attempt at such national juxtapositions to get at what is crucially causal is found
in Jonathan Steinberg's ambition to explain why the Holocaust did not take place in Italy and thus, by extension, why it did in Germany.47

This also raises the issue of which comparison. The very choice of the nations, or whatever the unit of analysis may be, to be compared often determines the answers drawn. This is clearly the case in terms of the content of the analysis, as when Germany looks quite different, more or less sonderbar, when compared either eastwards or westwards. It looks perhaps exceptional and, in certain respects, unwestern when compared to France or England. But if the focus is shifted eastwards, suddenly the nation looks like a cousin, and perhaps even a sibling, of its western neighbors.48 In a more methodological sense, the level of comparison helps determine the nature of the arrived-at conclusions. Skocpol insists on the role of states and their respective (in)abilities to deal with international crises as causal factors in the outbreak of revolutions. Clearly, much of this focus on the state is determined precisely by her comparison among France, Russia, and China. State apparatuses are one of the few and obvious things that these nations shared in common, however different and perhaps incomparable other aspects of their internal domestic arrangements were. Similar in its methodological determination is her dismissal of urban revolts, in favor of a focus on peasant insurrections, since not all of these nations had politically active city dwellers.49 One could make a similar argument concerning Barrington Moore's focus on the role of peasants and agriculture.

When Goldstone is interested in the broad sweep of crises in the early modern world across a range of nations, including Europe, the Ottoman Empire, and China, it is clear that he will not conclude that political factors, nor even economic ones, were their cause.50 Rather, the level of generality in his Fragestellung will lead on to factors all his nations had in common. In his case, that means ecological and demographic crises, and their intersection with other sorts of problems. Ertman's arguments against geopolitical explanations for the divergent development of constitutional versus absolutist states in Europe (above all France, Prussia, and England), hinge in large measure on including in his remarkably expansive scope nations formerly considered peripheral and not studied comparatively. By incorporating also Hungary and Poland, for example, he can show that the geopolitical arguments, by which both should have been absolutist and bureaucratic states, fail in that, in fact, they were constitutional and nonbureaucratic.51

But, if comparative history does not necessarily mean a concern with generalization and universal laws, it does signify one with cause. There
is no history that is not, ultimately and at least implicitly, comparative. It is not just that we need comparisons to know whether a national case is unique and singular, since the very formulation here presupposes at least an implied juxtaposition. It is also that, in order to know what is causal and what merely trivially connected, we must juxtapose to other, related yet different instances in order to isolate the important from the incidental, following the technique laid out so lucidly by Mill.\textsuperscript{52} Comparative history serves primarily to separate the important from the incidental and thus to point the way towards causal explanations. It does not necessarily accept the Hempelian claim that the particular must always be understood as an instance of a larger regularity.

But neither does it embrace the idea, put forth by Oakeshott, that, unlike the sciences, history explains by filling in the interstices ever more finely in a chain of narrative that, by being continuous, explains how one thing led to another. History, as he says, accounts for change by means of a full account of change.\textsuperscript{53} Explanation and narrative become the same thing. Comparative history accepts that the methods of difference and agreement are the closest history can come to laboratory conditions and falsifiability and that comparison is the historical experiment.\textsuperscript{54} It rejects as superficial the fashionable claim that the return of narrative to historical writing is more than an aesthetic fashion, concerned as it is with elevating palatability over plausibility. It sees the antinomy thus implied between narration and analysis as deeply misleading.

History has, in recent decades, drifted away from a concern with causality. One of the reasons has been not only the linguistic turn and the priority recently granted cultural history. Causality has come to be seen as part of a fixation on monicausal, reductionist, or at least overly parsimonious explanations rooted in an older and increasingly outmoded social-scientific paradigm. Cultural history is perfectly capable of comparisons. But generally speaking it is fair to say that history after the linguistic turn, and cultural history in particular, has been more concerned with what than with why, more focused on complexity than causation. To the extent that various coalitions of young fogies and Old Turks swing the pendulum slowly away from its predominating cultural focus, comparative history stands to play a crucial role. It will aim history at a goal short of the generalizing tendencies of the harder social sciences, yet still concerned with causality. It should refuse to allow our cousins in the social sciences to corner that market.
REFERENCES

3. I owe this story to that master of Cantabridgiana, Mark Pinson.
42. “Consider for example the proceedings that we call ‘games.’ I mean board-games, card-games, ball-games, Olympic games, and so on. What is common to them all? — Don’t say: ‘There must be something common, or they would not be called “games” — but look and see whether there is anything common to all. For if you look at them you will not see something that is common to all, but similarities, relationships, and a whole series of them at that. To repeat: don’t think, but look! Look for example at board-games, with their multifarious relationships. Now pass to card-games; here you find many correspondences with the first group, but many common features drop out, and others appear. When we pass next to ball-games, much that is common is retained, but much is lost... And the result of this examination is: we see a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing: sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities of detail. I can think of no better expression to characterize these similarities than ‘family resemblances’; for the various resemblances between members of a family: build, features, color of eyes, gait, temperament, etc. etc. overlap and criss-cross in the same way. — And I shall say: ‘games’ form a family.” Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §§ 66–67.
46. Peter Kolchin, *Free and Unfree Labor: American Slavery and Russian Serfdom* (Cambridge, MA, 1987). Again the proviso all too familiar to comparative historians must be stated here. The book has been criticized, especially by Russian historians, for its portrayal of serfdom, while generally lauded by the other side. I am in no position to evaluate the empirical foundations of the two aspects of the argument and, although obviously not denying that this has bearing on the merit of the work as history, my interest here lies with the formulation of the argument as a comparison. For criticism, see especially Michael Confino, “Servage russe, esclavage américain,” *Annales ESC*, 5 (1990), 1119–1141. I am indebted to Richard Wortman for this caution.