

The Comparative Method and the History of the Modern Humanities

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ABSTRACT

This article studies the modern development of the comparative method in the humanities and social sciences within Europe and the United States, and specifically addresses comparative subfields of philology, linguistics, anthropology, sociology, political science, literature, history, and folklore studies. A juxtapositional study of these disciplinary histories demonstrates the historical relation between their methods and relation to other fields, like comparative anatomy. It elucidates several recurrent features of the different applications of comparativism, particularly a consistent tension between genetic (or historical) versus functionalist (or contextual) explanations for common patterns, and suggests that comparatists would benefit from closer study both of the history of the method and its development within other fields. Ultimately this study casts fresh light on the modern history of the humanities, their incomplete differentiation from social-scientific fields like sociology and political science, and the interdisciplinary exchanges that have often shaped entire fields of study.

Why do we compare? As humanist scholars, we use comparison all of the time. This is true whether we work in explicitly comparative disciplines like comparative history or historical linguistics, or in the range of other humanist areas of enquiry that populate the modern humanities and a good chunk of the social sciences. How may we differentiate the way comparative analysis is used in the humanities at different moments in time, in different places, within different disciplines? What is the history of modern comparativism?

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The comparative method, which analyzes two or more systems of relation for common patterns and distinctions (usually identifying these patterns as products of either a shared genealogy or shared responses to specific historical conditions), emerged in the transition from the eighteenth to the nineteenth century as the preeminent method for finding commonalities across an extraordinary range of aesthetic, social, and scientific fields of research, from philology to anatomy, from geology to sociology. For this reason, comparativism, and the comparative method specifically, is a central object for a comprehensive history of the humanities.¹

The modern comparative method emerged when a new generation of writers, historians, and naturalists developed fresh ways to explore the analogies drawn between specimens and documents, between natural groups and societies—part of the wider realignment, noted by Foucault and many others, around the problem of social history and the history of biological life.² Two alignments were crucial to this transformation. First, early nineteenth-century scholarship is marked by an interdisciplinary recognition that distinct comparative fields might draw productively on each other for models of comparative analysis (see, for example, B. Ricardo Brown's recent study of the importance of historical linguistics as a model for early nineteenth-century geology, anatomy, and sociology).³ The second major shift was the recognition that previously distinct modes of analysis—marked by the distinction between “comparison” and “analogy”—might be usefully combined in the comparative method. James Turner, in his wide-ranging study of philology and the history of the humanities, argues that the “use of comparison to highlight similarities and differences in objects of study is ancient and perhaps universal.”⁴

1. This is clear if we turn to the three-volume *Making of the Humanities* series (2010–15), which contains nearly five hundred uses of the word “compare” and its cognates, spread through all three volumes. Rens Bod's introduction to the first volume of *The Making of the Humanities* defines our common goal as “a comparative history of the humanities,” and many of the papers published in that series and in the first issues of this journal weigh the implications of comparison for the study of humanism from the classical period through the present day. Rens Bod, Jaap Maat, and Thijs Weststeijn, *The Making of the Humanities* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2010), 1:7.

2. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Pantheon, 1971).

3. B. Ricardo Brown, *Until Darwin: Science, Human Variety and the Origins of Race* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2010).

4. James Turner, *Philology: The Forgotten Origins of the Modern Humanities* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014), xiv. Here it should be noted that “philology” is a very old and variegated field of study and will be distinguished from “comparative” philology, a much narrower field of comparative linguistic and etymological study that emerged in the nineteenth century and laid the foundation for modern linguistics.

Rens Bod, in his expansive history of the humanities in its *longue durée*, also observes that “there has been a continuous humanistic tradition from Antiquity to the present day that focuses on the quest for patterns and rules (with alongside it a parallel tradition that concentrates on the *rejection* of patterns).”⁵

As Bod suggests, while study of similarity necessarily brushes into contrast, and vice versa, they have not always been practiced together. In fact, the use of “comparison” to denominate both is largely a modern phenomenon. Before 1800, “comparison” was generally used as a rhetorical device that underlined differences.⁶ “Analogy,” on the other hand, was used primarily to study the similarity between distinct systems, especially in Christian metaphysics and philosophy.⁷ The nineteenth century saw a new and extensive overlap in the use of both “analogy” and “comparison” in nineteenth-century English writing on the comparative method, as well as in French and German texts (as “*analogie*”/“*comparaison*” and “*Analogie*”/“*Vergleich*”). The interlinking of these vocabularies in the nineteenth century both demonstrates an enhanced focus on analyzing both the similarities and differences in common patterns and can help make sense of the complicated differentiation of the comparative method within specific academic disciplines.⁸ While practitioners of the comparative method used the terms “analogy” and “comparison” interchangeably in the early nineteenth century, by the close of the century “comparison” became dominant, while “analogy” meant either loose spec-

5. Rens Bod, *A New History of the Humanities: The Search for Principles and Patterns from Antiquity to the Present* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 348.

6. Briefly, despite the literal meaning of comparison (to “pair” or “make equal”) as developed by Cicero and Quintilian, comparison was used primarily to establish contrasts, both as part of judicial proceedings, and in the rhetoric of blame (Patricia P. Matsen, Philip B. Rollinson, and Marion Sousa, eds., *Readings from Classical Rhetoric* [Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1990], 183; Quintilian, *Quintilian’s Institutes of Oratory; or, Education of an Orator*, trans. John Selby Watson (London: G. Bell & Sons, 1892), 1:105, 353. Later examples abound from the “Table of Comparisons” that drives Francis Bacon’s inductive method in the *New Organon*, to the conceit of John Donne’s eighth elegy, “The Comparison,” to the important subgenre of comparison tracts that emerged during the tractarian debates of the seventeenth century and remained a popular format for printed criticism until the 1800s. Henry Peacham, for example, observes that “Comparatio is a word of large and ample comprehension, and therefore it may stand for many figures, but namely those which do tend most especially to amplify or diminish by forme of comparisen.” Henry Peacham, *The Garden of Eloquence, Conteyning the Figures of Grammar and Rhetorick* (London: H. Jackson, 1593), 156.

7. See Victor Harris, “Allegory to Analogy in the Interpretation of Scripture,” *Philological Quarterly* 45 (1966): 1–23. See also Devin Griffiths, *The Age of Analogy: Science and Literature between the Darwins* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016), 30 n. 8.

8. In my own work, I have explored this conjunction as a product of the Romantic period, and the elevation of a new comparative method that sought to reorganize the study of natural and social history in relational and historical terms; see Griffiths, *The Age of Analogy*.

ulation or took on a precise and considerably narrower disciplinary meaning (as in linguistics). This story of separation establishes a pattern of procedural differentiation that I will explore in later sections.

The present article focuses on the question of how such strategies of comparative analysis were formalized as the modern “comparative method” through the formation and development of various academic disciplines and shows how specific fields—philology and linguistics, anthropology and sociology, history and literature—applied the method to distinct objects of study. Second, I show that a comparative analysis of their disciplinary histories shows that different applications of the method nevertheless display a consistent tension between studying genealogy and local adaptation: namely, do the patterns disclosed by comparison reflect a shared origin or a common adjustment to shared conditions? The lack of a common history of the comparative method means that, as each discipline has confronted specific challenges posed by the method, particularly the tension between a genetic versus functionalist account of what common patterns mean, they have often failed to weigh how such dilemmas might be immanent to the method itself, rather than a feature of the specific objects of their study. Finally, I argue that an interdisciplinary study of the comparative method, in drawing out this shared dilemma, can help individual fields specify such problems more clearly and draw from solutions developed by other disciplines. One key innovation, developed separately in comparative philology and comparative literature, is the discrimination in comparative analysis between distinct axes of similarity and difference. In the classical period, it had been assumed that any comparison evaluated difference (and sometimes, similarity) with respect to a single quality—a “*tertium comparationis*.” But in the modern reformulation, many comparatists have treated similarity and difference at different levels of scale or with respect to distinct features—an innovation that has often helped to stabilize the tension between genetic and contextual analysis.

One last note about disciplinary nomenclature: though I focus primarily on Anglo-American scholarship, I will also consider whether researchers working in French and German indicate the same interplay and differentiation of comparativisms. This juxtaposition provides some illuminating contrasts, insofar as the Anglo-American academy did not follow continental Europe in organizing humanist fields like history and literature with the social sciences under the *Geisteswissenschaften*—the “spiritual” sciences. As a result, Anglophone historians and comparative literary scholars have tended to draw a stronger distinction between their methodologies and the approaches taken, for instance, by anthropology and sociology. In this article, I emphasize the German nomenclature—*Geisteswissenschaften*—insofar as it initially embraced both humanist and social scientific fields and implied their interplay.

PHILOLOGY AND LINGUISTICS

Comparative anatomy and comparative philology deserve equal billing as the fields of enquiry that raised the comparative method to prominence in the nineteenth century and explored its key features. Both fields drew liberally from the success of the other as evidence that comparativism worked. Friedrich Schlegel, in formulating the new field he termed “comparative grammar,” argued that it “will give us entirely new information on the genealogy of languages, in exactly the same way in which comparative anatomy has thrown light on natural history.”⁹ And as evidence mounted that Schlegel was right, Charles Darwin—who honed his interest in evolutionary genealogy through extensive comparative studies of barnacle physiology—explained that studying the genealogy of species was like the study of linguistic history: “The various degrees of difference in the languages from the same stock, would have to be expressed by groups subordinate to groups; but the proper or even only possible arrangement would still be genealogical; and this would be strictly natural, as it would connect together all languages, extinct and modern, by the closest affinities.”¹⁰ Insofar as comparative anatomy and comparative philology were essentially coeval and mutually influential, I have argued that it makes more sense to talk about Romantic comparativism as a single movement with differentiated issues, rather than an independent invention of various fields of inquiry.¹¹ I will focus on comparative philology over anatomy here for two key reasons. First, comparative philology (a subdiscipline of philology that emerged in the nineteenth century) was generally more important in providing a model for the comparative humanities in general. And second, it can be argued that comparative philology, in seeking to demonstrate the consistent pattern of human (rather than natural) history, had to clear a substantially higher bar than anatomy. In contrast to the natural world, many theorists of comparativism believed that the social world was too complex, too riddled with the idiosyncrasies of chance events and individual caprice, to provide grounds for strong inductive generalizations. Even John Stuart Mill, who is still considered by com-

9. Cited in Murray Fowler, “The Historical-Comparative Method,” *Classical Journal* 52, no. 6 (March 1957): 260.

10. Charles Darwin, *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection*, 1st ed. (London: Murray, 1859), 422–23, <http://darwin-online.org.uk/>. Note that, in Darwin’s time, “natural classification” was a technical term used in contrast to “artificial” classifications. For more on the interplay between comparative anatomy, evolution, and linguistics, see Joseph Errington, *Linguistics in a Colonial World: A Story of Language, Meaning, and Power* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008); Stephen G. Alter, *Darwinism and the Linguistic Image: Language, Race, and Natural Theology in the Nineteenth Century* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011); Brown, *Until Darwin*; Griffiths, *The Age of Analogy*.

11. Griffiths, *The Age of Analogy*, chaps. 1, 2.

paratists in many fields to be the foremost nineteenth-century theorist of the method, worried that human society was too intricate for the controlled study and crossed validation that allow strong empirical generalization.¹² Hence, when Rasmus Rask and Jacob Grimm uncovered the “sound laws” that explained the phonological shifts that transformed the ancestral European language (eventually named Proto-Indo-European or PIE) into German, they demonstrated not only a sound basis for the reconstruction of common ancestral languages, but far more important, showed how the comparative method could adduce deep, lawlike features beneath the complexity of human society. In doing so, they validated the comparative method as a powerful and truly empirical approach to humanist study.¹³

Most histories of the comparative method in linguistics date its emergence to Sir William Jones’s 1786 discussion of the common etymological and grammatical features of Sanskrit, Latin, Greek, and what he termed “Gothick” and “Celtick” (though, as Henry Hoenigswald and others have noted, the similarities between various European languages had “been seen, tabulated, and discussed for centuries”).¹⁴ Jones’s discovery, coming amid an era of imperial contest, historical uncertainty, and fresh investment in national literatures and languages, caught the imagination of philologists throughout Europe, including Schlegel. In studying the “affinity both in the roots of verbs and in the forms of grammar,” Jones also demonstrates the generous initial scope of the method.¹⁵ This shift was taken up by Franz Bopp in his further studies of comparative grammar. Later comparative philologists would draw a strong distinction between etymological

12. See discussion in Theda Skocpol and Margaret Somers, “The Uses of Comparative History in Macrosocial Inquiry,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 22, no. 2 (1980): 174–97.

13. Henry M. Hoenigswald, “On the History of the Comparative Method,” *Anthropological Linguistics* 35, no. 1 (1993): 59–60.

14. *Ibid.*, 60. Thijs Weststeijn and Gerhard F. Strasser, for instance, have explored the importance of linguistic study of Chinese and South Asian languages as part of Christian missionary expansion and efforts to secure Dutch East Indian trade (Thijs Weststeijn, “‘Signs That Signify Themselves’: Writing with Images in the Seventeenth Century,” in Bod, Maat, and Weststeijn, *The Making of the Humanities*, 1:133–59, and “The Middle Kingdom in the Low Countries: Sinology in the Seventeenth-Century Netherlands,” in Bod, Maat, and Weststeijn, *The Making of the Humanities*, 209–42, <http://site.ebrary.com/id/10682825>; Gerhard F. Strasser, “The Impact on the European Humanities of Early Reports from Catholic Missionaries from China, Tibet and Japan between 1600 and 1700,” in Bod, Maat, and Weststeijn, *The Making of the Humanities*, 185–208, <http://site.ebrary.com/id/10682825>); and Toon van Hal observes the importance of comparative analysis to the early modern “Scythian theory” of a common origin to European languages; Toon van Hal, “Linguistics ‘Ante Litteram’: Compiling and Transmitting Views on the Diversity and Kinship of Languages before the Nineteenth Century,” in Bod, Maat, and Weststeijn, *The Making of the Humanities*, 39, <http://site.ebrary.com/id/10682825>.

15. William Jones, “The Third Anniversary Discourse, on the Hindus,” in *The Works of Sir William Jones* (London: G. G. & J. Robinson and R. H. Evans, 1799), 1:26.

and grammatical comparison (a distinction that would mature as a strong division between semantic and syntactic linguistics). For Hoenigswald, Bopp's call for a "comparative dissection of languages" marked the birth of the true "comparative method" as now known to linguists: that is, a method directed "not to comparison at large, comparison for comparison's sake (i.e., typological comparison), but to a process whereby original features can be separated from recent ones and where the aim of classification was subordinated to the aim of reconstruction."¹⁶ Moreover, the "sound laws" formulated by Rask and Grimm in the 1810s and 1820s introduced an entirely new focus on comparative analysis: the vocalization of languages, later termed "phonology." Bopp's work was expansively developed in August Schleicher's *A Compendium of the Comparative Grammar of the Indo-European, Sanskrit, Greek and Latin Languages* (1874–77), a work that combined comparative grammar, the study of sound shifts, and the stemmatics of textual criticism, allowing comparative philology to achieve its first important reconstruction of PIE.¹⁷

This progressive narrative of comparative method's development in historical linguistics—which locates the inauguration of linguistics in the march from grammar to sound law to reconstruction—obscures a more fundamental process of differentiation, in which the objects of comparative analysis were refined, separated out, and assigned to distinct areas of research. This is clear in the shifting place of "comparison" and "analogy" as terms of art in linguistic research. From the early nineteenth century, "analogy" is often used as a close complement to "comparison"; if "comparison" named the procedure, "analogy" named its object, the systematic grammatical and lexical patterns of languages. Schleicher, for instance, uses cognates of "analogie" some 137 times in his *Compendium* (1861) versus 37 uses of "compar" and only four of "Vergleich," and even the 1921 printing of Saussure's *Cours de linguistique générale* uses "analogue" and its cognates some 29 times to the 37 times it uses some version of "comparaison."¹⁸ Yet over the course of the nineteenth century, analogy came to mean something like its own opposite, in a process cogently summarized by Hans Henrich Hock and Brian D. Joseph: "Ancient Greek and Latin grammar and linguistic philosophy had introduced and popularized the notion of analogy as a designation for structural pattern and regularity. 'False' analogy, then, lay in permitting a word to deviate from the 'true' or 'proper' pat-

16. Hoenigswald, "On the History of the Comparative Method," 55.

17. *Ibid.*, 62.

18. August Schleicher, *Compendium der Vergleichenden Grammatik der Indogermanischen Sprachen* (Weimar: H. Böhlau, 1861); Ferdinand de Saussure, Charles Bally, Sechehaye Charles Albert, and Albert Riedlinger, *Cours de linguistique générale* (Paris: Payot, 1921), <http://catalog.hathitrust.org/api/volumes/oclc/23420195.html>.

tern.”¹⁹ Yet with increasing emphasis on systematic phonology in the reconstruction of PIE, and the consequent effort to discriminate consistent genealogical patterns from the idiosyncratic mixing of linguistic structures “by analogy” (seen, for instance, in the substitution in English of the plural “pigs” for “swine”), philologists increasingly used “analogy” to refer to what had once been termed “false analogy,” finding new terms—including “correspondences,” “cognates,” and “parallels”—to refer to patterns that were previously termed “analogies.” As Hock and Joseph explain: “as a consequence of this relabeling, the term analogy underwent a considerable change in meaning, from ‘pattern’ or ‘regularity’ to something like ‘change in phonetic structure conditioned by non-phonetic factors in other lexical items, such as word structure, syntactic function, and semantics,’” in other words, a false mixture of phonetic and non-phonetic factors that complicated genealogical reconstruction via phonology. Hock and Joseph’s “something like” is key here; as R. L. Trask summarizes in his influential introduction to linguistics, there are at least four distinct kinds of “analogy” recognized by modern linguists.²⁰

Strikingly, the shifting fortunes of analogy in nineteenth-century studies of language closely echo its fate in comparative anatomy over the same decades. Whereas anatomical patterns had often been described as “analogies” in the early part of the century, at mid-century many anatomists, foremost Richard Owen, worked to develop an alternative vocabulary, using the term “homology” for patterns that reflected accurate archetypal (or later, genealogical) patterns, reserving “analogy” for false patterns or adaptations to common conditions that falsely implied a common ancestry.²¹

Comparative analysis from this point forward would typically imply some sort of contingent history of relation and differentiation. Linguists have termed this the “historical-comparative” or “genetic-comparative” method in their disciplinary histories, and Stefani Engelstein has recently explored how both philology and comparative anatomy shared in their turn to the use of the comparative method for genealogical study and reconstruction.²² Moreover, the differentiation of the modern genetic-comparative method in philology was generally incomplete in the nineteenth century, at least, with

19. Hans Henrich Hock and Brian D. Joseph, *Language History, Language Change, and Language Relationship: An Introduction to Historical and Comparative Linguistics* (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 1996), 153.

20. Ibid., 154. These include “proportional” or “four-part” analogy, analogical maintenance, analogical restoration; while the last two are often described collectively as “analogical levelling.” R. L. Trask, *Historical Linguistics* (London: Arnold, 1996), 106–8.

21. Griffiths, *The Age of Analogy*, 161–62.

22. Stefani Engelstein, *Sibling Action* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017).

respect to later disciplinary accounts. Fowler observes critically that “Rask’s examples depend entirely for their validity upon the hypothesis that identity or similarity in meaning can be established for certain words in different languages.”²³ And Hoenigswald cautions that Bopp’s comparative grammar “is truly grammar—the subsequent usage in which *comparative grammar* is a mere quaint equivalent of *reconstruction by the comparative method* must not be dragged in.”²⁴ Such disagreements over the comparative method’s authentic date of birth, like the effort to discriminate between the different forms of analogy, reflect so many attempts to reduce a more complex and differentiated pattern to crisp typologies and clear narratives of development.

Hoenigswald’s observation that “the comparative method is one of the guises under which structure was recognized” more accurately grasps the situation. Perhaps the most important contribution of comparative philology in the nineteenth century was to powerfully demonstrate the ability of comparative analysis to elucidate the deep structure of social forms. In showing that sound shifts exhibit simple, lawlike behavior, and then reconstructing deep historical genealogies in the absence of written evidence, comparative philology essentially launched the structural project. As we will see, comparative anthropology, sociology, mythology, and folklore studies all took comparative philology as their model in seeking lawlike patterns to explain the objects of their study. Even Saussure emphasized the intimate relation between his synchronic analysis and comparative linguistics in his *Cours*, characterizing his own method—which would come to define structuralism—as an outgrowth of comparative study.²⁵ Read against the history of comparativism, Saussure’s distinction between diachronic and synchronic perspectives (which clearly reformulates the earlier positivist distinction between what John Stuart Mill termed “social dynamics” and “social statics”)²⁶ can be recognized as a distinction immanent to the modern comparative method. Moreover, later scholars, particularly nonlinguists, have emphasized Saussure’s later *Cours* (recorded and published from lecture notes by third parties) at the expense of his more comparative *Mémoire sur le système primitif des voyelles* (1877), which he wrote himself.²⁷ As a result, humanist scholarship has often overlooked Saussure’s investment in historical philology. This in turn has obscured the deeply comparative investment of structuralism,

23. Fowler, “The Historical-Comparative Method,” 261.

24. Hoenigswald, “On the History of the Comparative Method,” 57.

25. Griffiths, *The Age of Analogy*, 46–47.

26. John Stuart Mill, *A System of Logic: Ratiocinative and Inductive* (London: John W. Parker, 1843), 2:594.

27. Ferdinand de Saussure, *Mémoire sur le système primitif des voyelles dans les langues indo-européennes* (Paris: Vieweg, 1877).

with the further consequence that structuralist methods have often been challenged on the grounds that they are antihistoricist.²⁸

Comparativism continually suggests (as we will see) that any pattern disclosed by comparative study has two basic avenues of interpretation: one might take a narrative approach, studying the historical implications as a question of common genealogy or process, or one might take a systematic perspective and look to some other determining framework, whether that be the organic integrity or structural grammar of social systems, features of human nature or psychology, or the shared conditions of larger physical or social environments. When we read the comparative method comparatively—that is, across the disciplines—we see the importance of that method not only to the disposition of modern humanism, but to the transdisciplinary movements that have sometimes swept through the various fields of humanist research and kindled new areas of interest.

ANTHROPOLOGY AND SOCIOLOGY

One key distinction between modern anthropology and sociology is that the former (in most accounts) turned its back on the comparative method in the early twentieth century, while sociology has continued to invest in comparativism, particularly as coordinated with statistical methodologies that allow the comparison of larger numbers of examples. One can read this disagreement as two distinct readings of nearly contemporaneous fin de siècle statements by Franz Boas and Émile Durkheim. Whereas Durkheim famously argued that “comparative sociology is not a particular branch of sociology, it is sociology itself,” Boas cautioned that it was often very difficult to tell whether any given “analogon”—the pattern elucidated by comparative analysis—was the product of common influence, genealogical relation, or a shared response to similar environmental or structural conditions.²⁹ For this reason, Boas emphasized a focus on “a detailed study of customs in their bearings to the total culture of the tribe practicing them, and in connection with an investigation of their geographical distribution among neighboring tribes,” rather than wide-scale comparative analysis.³⁰ American anthropology, and later cultural anthropology, largely followed his lead.

But reviewed comparatively, and in the perspective of nineteenth-century discussions of comparison, it is clear that both Durkheim and Boas were trying to place the

28. While I do not mean to imply that structuralism emerged smoothly from comparatism, most formative structuralist accounts, from those of Saussure and Levi-Strauss, to the work of Vladimir Propp and Roman Jakobson, produce their structural generalizations on the basis of extended comparative study, in the manner of comparative philology.

29. Émile Durkheim, *Les règles de la méthode sociologique* (Paris: F. Alcan, 1907), 169; Franz Boas, “The Limitations of the Comparative Method of Anthropology,” *Science* 4, no. 103 (1896): 901.

30. Boas, “The Limitations of the Comparative Method of Anthropology,” 905.

comparative study of society on firmer footing. By the close of the nineteenth century it was clear that, whether examining human customs and behavior or societies in general, researchers were struggling to find the kinds of systematic pattern that had powered philology's most important nineteenth-century achievements. The historian Edward A. Freeman, in his 1874 *Comparative Politics* (a series of Rede lectures which, with Herbert Spencer's *Principles of Sociology* [1876–96], provided an important early proposal for comparative sociological research), described the new sociology as a supplement to comparative philology. Insisting that any comparative insights into the relation between social formations be checked against the “internal proof” provided by that “science of language,” he argued that “comparative politics” was only possible because “Comparative Philology has in truth revealed to us several stages of the prae-historic growth of man for which we have no historic evidence.”³¹ In Freeman's account, the comparative study of societies operates within the framework of PIE and the evidence for a kinship between the “Aryan nations” and their “races.”

In this way, Freeman demonstrates the crucial alliance between evolutionary thought, comparative study, and racial science in the nineteenth century. Nineteenth-century racial science, while evolving from earlier climactic or environmental determinist theories of human difference, drew considerable support from both the apparently ethno-national language groups supplied by linguistic genealogies and contemporary efforts by comparative anatomists like Richard Owen to produce what Philip F. Rehbock has termed “transcendental anatomies”—archetypal physical typologies that would transcend the variation of specific living forms.³² Such approaches were cited, particularly by American, German, and French theorists of race, as evidence for polygenetic theories of human difference—theories that argued not only that the different races of humanity lacked a common origin but also that intercrossing of those races was not biologically viable or simply undesirable. These theories, often articulated through comparison as well as analogies drawn between natural and social systems, found horrific application in the twentieth century as justifications for eugenics and Nazi racial science.³³

This was not the only significant issue of nineteenth-century comparative philology and linguistics. Some comparatists, for example, Friedrich Max Müller, cautioned

31. Edward A. Freeman, *Comparative Politics* (New York: Macmillan, 1874), 1, 6.

32. Philip F. Rehbock, “Transcendental Anatomy,” in *Romanticism and the Sciences*, ed. Andrew Cunningham and Nicholas Jardine (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 144–60.

33. For more on the relation between comparative philology, biology, and nineteenth-century racial science, see George L. Mosse, *Toward the Final Solution: A History of European Racism* (New York: Fertig, 1978); Léon Poliakov, *The Aryan Myth: A History of Racist and Nationalist Ideas in Europe* (New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 1996); Alter, *Darwinism and the Linguistic Image*; Brown, *Until Darwin*.

against the frequent use of comparative linguistics to justify ethnic classifications.³⁴ Moreover, Freeman demonstrates the extraordinary attraction of PIE and the sound laws as models for other fields of comparative research. In order for the comparative historian to grasp the basic currents of history, Freeman argued: “We must throw ourselves into a state of mind to which political constitutions seem as absolutely colourless as grammatical forms,—a state of mind to which the change from monarchy to democracy or from democracy to monarchy seems as little a matter of moral praise or blame as the process by which the Latin language changed into the French or the process by which the High-German parted off from the Low.”³⁵ This emphasis upon “colourless” forms (though it misidentifies the phonological nature of the sound laws as “grammatical”) marks the importance of the German sound shift rules as a model for historical transformations that are essentially impersonal and systematic. In essence, Freeman imagines structuralism *avant la lettre*, while underlining its formative connection to comparative philology. In a similar fashion, E. B. Tylor’s anthropology sought the “laws of human thought and action” rather than simply the genealogical relations between societies.³⁶ For this reason, Tylor advocated a comparative approach that studied the widest possible range of societies and time periods. This is precisely the complaint raised by Müller (whose own studies of comparative philology and mythology were important models), when he protested Tylor’s “promiscuous intercomparison of the customs of all mankind.” But Müller missed the point: Tylor was after systematic laws and patterns that transcended idiosyncratic historical circumstance, including simple divergence between societies.³⁷

This raised a crucial problem: given a common cultural pattern between two societies, how can we tell the difference between a commonality rooted in “laws of human thought and action” (whether conceived in terms of psychology, social structure, or a characteristic response to similar conditions) from common habits derived from either a shared ancestor or from direct borrowing between those societies? Francis Galton, a nephew of Darwin and a committed eugenicist, raised just this objection when Tylor presented his study of marriage customs to the Royal Anthropological Institute in

34. See the discussion in Poliakov, *The Aryan Myth*, 206, 214.

35. Freeman, *Comparative Politics*, 23.

36. Edward Burnett Tylor, *Primitive Culture* (London: Murray, 1871), 1. So, too, did Claude Lévi-Strauss seek systematic shifts in totemic signification within indigenous societies. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).

37. Tylor is cited in Turner, *Philology*, 346. See also the discussion in Gopala Sarana, “On Comparative Methods in Social-Cultural Anthropology and in Linguistics,” *Anthropological Quarterly* 38, no. 1 (1965): 20–40.

1888 (Tylor's first extended application of the comparative method to a specific anthropological problem).³⁸ In effect, Galton was translating the distinction between homology and analogy, a common concern in contemporary comparative anatomy and evolutionary biology, into human terms. If it was often hard to tell, when looking at two organisms with shared features, whether those features were due to a common ancestor or adaptation to a common environment, the problem was far thornier for human societies, insofar as they might freely adopt traits and behaviors from each other. It was a challenge so sheer and ultimately influential that it became known as "Galton's problem," and it continues to loom large in the comparative social sciences. Galton, of course, realized that the problem extended beyond Tylor's anthropology (Galton popularized the contrast between "nature" and "nurture" after all),³⁹ but in the following decades anthropologists and sociologists devised a range of means for addressing his dilemma, from limiting comparison to widely different societies and groups believed to be long isolated both historically and genealogically, to a renewed interest in Mill's methods of "agreement," "difference," and "concomitant variation" as strategies that might elucidate controlled comparisons from a variety of cases.

This is the proper context for reading both Boas's critique of the comparative method and Durkheim's *Rules*. The former argued that a more intensive preparatory study of regional groups could help document the nature and extent of genealogical relations; with this in mind, the anthropologist might later make more effective use of a wider comparative method. And Durkheim, for his part, worked carefully through Mill's methods (rejecting all but the method of "concomitant variation"), before formulating three additional methods for comparative study. Each retained the belief that the comparative method offered the best hope for elucidating basic laws of human nature and society. As Boas put it in that same paper, the focused histories he promoted were not the ultimate goal, "because the general laws, although implied in such description, cannot be clearly formulated nor their relative value appreciated without a thorough comparison of the manner in which they assert themselves in different cultures."⁴⁰

With this in mind, I will quickly survey twentieth-century debates over the place of comparativism in both anthropology and social science. After Boas, a major rift developed between American anthropologists, who tended to focus on careful immersive fieldwork, and British "armchair" anthropologists. Students of the former, includ-

38. Alan Dundes, "The Anthropologist and the Comparative Method in Folklore," *Folklore Research* 23, no. 2 (December 1986): 129.

39. Francis Galton, *English Men of Science: Their Nature and Nurture* (London: Macmillan, 1874).

40. Boas, "The Limitations of the Comparative Method of Anthropology," 907.

ing Ruth Benedict, Margaret Mead, and Edward Sapir, largely followed the Boasian turn toward internal explanation and extensive fieldwork, while the latter, including W. H. R. Rivers and Alfred Radcliffe-Brown, followed Tylor in scouring and comparing the recorded observations of various field studies in order to elucidate more general patterns. In the early twentieth century, these two camps were distinguished as American “ethnology” versus British “social anthropology”—a formulation that substantially reverses the ethnographic/anthropological divide seen between British and American anthropologists in the mid-nineteenth century.⁴¹ E. A. Hammel argues that the turn against the comparative method in early twentieth-century American anthropology (or ethnology) marks “a rejection of evolutionism, extreme diffusionism, and of any kind of conjectural history,” but it marked equally a distancing from the kind of racial theorization that comparative human anatomy and ethnography often entailed in the later nineteenth century, particularly as practiced by American scientific authorities like Louis Agassiz.⁴²

Virtually the only area of anthropological research in which comparativism remained a robust method in the United States was in folklore studies. As a kind of meeting ground between the stemmatics of classical textual criticism, and the genealogical approaches of historical linguistics and comparative mythology, folklore studies has long emphasized the comparative analysis of specific oral literary forms and motifs in order to reconstruct regional traditions and genealogies. Carl Wilhelm von Sydow was particularly influential in formulating the “Finnish” method in folklore studies, which emphasized a combination of internal comparative evidence and territorial association (as an analogue of the linguistic groupings analyzed by the comparative philologists). A botanist by training, Sydow proposed that traditional genealogical analysis be combined with a consideration of the “oikotype”—the manner in which specific folktales or traditions are adapted to the specific physical environments occupied by a given society (in essence, emphasizing the contextualist or “nurture” dimension of Galton’s problem).⁴³ Alan Dundes summarizes: “The combination of the historical and geographical

41. On the ethnology/anthropology distinction, see Fred Eggan, “Social Anthropology and the Method of Controlled Comparison,” *American Anthropologist* 56, no. 5 (1954): 743–63. On the relation between anthropology and ethnography, see George W. Stocking, *Victorian Anthropology* (New York: Free Press, 1987); Adrian J. Desmond and James R. Moore, *Darwin’s Sacred Cause: How a Hatred of Slavery Shaped Darwin’s Views on Human Evolution* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2009); Britt Rusert, *Fugitive Science: Empiricism and Freedom in Early African American Culture*, (New York: New York University Press, 2017).

42. E. A. Hammel, “The Comparative Method in Anthropological Perspective,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 22, no. 2 (1980): 151.

43. Alan Dundes, *International Folkloristics: Classic Contributions by the Founders of Folklore* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999), 137–38.

criteria for determining the hypothetical original form or home of a given myth led eventually to the designation of the method as 'historic-geographic.'⁴⁴

In the social sciences, by contrast to anthropology, the comparative method has continually enjoyed support, with a concomitant investment in revisiting and reimagining its basic methods. Theorists continue to refine sociological approaches to comparison: Charles C. Ragin, for example, has adapted logical methods to sharpen the comparative method and assert its particular value in relation to statistical approaches like regression analysis.⁴⁵ Sociologists have been concerned with the difference between "big N" analyses suited to statistical study (which compare a large number of cases to increase the weight of results at the cost of increasingly narrow implications) and "small N" studies suited to comparative analysis (in which a small number of cases are considered, raising the nuance and complexity of results at the expense of reducing the generalizability of results). Ragin, in particular, has sought to move beyond this contrast between "quantitative" and "qualitative" approaches by adapting Boolean logic (an approach now referred to as "qualitative comparative analysis"), and that effort represents perhaps the most important contribution to comparative theory since Mill's *Logic* and Durkheim's *Rules*.⁴⁶

Ragin's contribution also gives a concrete example of how the comparative method becomes increasingly specified within individual disciplines, as it is further adapted to (and remakes) the objects of research. Political science, a field that emerged after and in close dialogue with sociology, has largely followed the latter in exploring comparativism as a method suited to "small N" analyses.⁴⁷ But political science is more explicitly divided between the genetic and contextual approach to comparison, analyzing relationships in order to explain either the historical evolution of political systems or their adaptation to their contemporary context. Whereas, in anthropology and sociology, these two camps have been described as "historicist" versus "functionalist,"⁴⁸ in political science both are described specifically as alternative ways to think about institutions. Moreover, as Kathleen Thelen explains, the functionalist approach has been largely co-

44. Ibid., 131.

45. Charles C. Ragin, *The Comparative Method: Moving Beyond Qualitative and Quantitative Strategies* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987).

46. Although it is unclear, given ongoing debate over the robustness of the technique, whether qualitative comparative analysis will continue to gain adherents (though I note it has recently been taken up by a range of academic fields).

47. Arend Lijphart, "Comparative Politics and the Comparative Method," *American Political Science Review* 65, no. 3 (1971): 682–93.

48. Hammel, "The Comparative Method in Anthropological Perspective," 151.

opted in the latter twentieth century by “rational choice” institutionalists, who argue that “aggregate outcomes need to be understood in terms of the actions and behavior of individuals behaving strategically.”⁴⁹ One consequence of this redistribution of the old nature versus nurture dialectic is that functionalism is conceived as a macrosocial approach that works top-down (considering the historical determination of political formations and their consequent impact on individuals), while rational choice institutionalism is viewed as a microsocial approach that operates bottom-up (considering how strategic individual decisions affect the larger polity). As John Zysmann puts it, “rational choice institutionalists start with individuals and ask where institutions came from, whereas historical institutionalists start with institutions and ask how they affect individual” behaviors.⁵⁰ Moreover, Thelen has innovatively proposed that we think about this division (which captures also the distinction between diachronic and synchronic analysis) as a contrast between “process” and “equilibrium order.” One further consequence of this redistribution into distinct scalar dynamics (institution versus individual, top-down versus bottom-up), along with the focus on political institutions, is that both the historical and contextual perspectives are considered from a systems point of view. As Thelen further explains, the process analysis of historical institutionalism underlines both the “path dependency” of institutions and an essentially “relational” (hence systematic) frame, while rational choice institutionalists tend to view “institutions as coordinating mechanisms sustaining the equilibria” of their political systems.⁵¹

Thelen’s contrast between process and equilibrium helpfully illuminates a general feature of the opposition between a genetic/historical versus contextual/systematic approach. But at a more general level, it also demonstrates how the various fields of the erstwhile *Geisteswissenschaften* bump into the same basic problems of comparativism as if for the first time. To give two quick examples, Evan S. Lieberman’s proposal for a “nested” or “mixed method” approach to comparative political science substantially retraces (apparently, unwittingly) the case made twenty-five years earlier by historians Theda Skocpol and Margaret Somers for the “complementary system” of comparative methodologies of macrosocial enquiry as well as the “incorporating comparison” of

49. Kathleen Thelen, “Historical Institutionalism in Comparative Politics,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 2, no. 1 (1999): 377.

50. Quoted *ibid.*, 379.

51. For quotations from Thelen, see 381, 384, and 381. Thelen’s approach explains the connection between comparativism and the “New Institutionalism” of Karen Orren and Stephen Skowronek, “Beyond the Iconography of Order: Notes for a ‘New Institutionalism,’” in *The Dynamics of American Politics: Approaches and Interpretations*, ed. Lawrence C. Dodd and Jillson Calvin (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1994), 311–30.

sociologist Philip McMichael.⁵² Similarly, Mark Ridley (an evolutionary biologist) observes that Ruth Mace and Mark Pagel, in exploring the uses of linguistic “phylogenetic analysis” to answer Galton’s problem for anthropology, completely overlook the substantial and sophisticated work biologists have put into clarifying the general methods and applications of phylogeny.⁵³ The larger point is that our ability to adequately address the challenges specific to any given field may be dependent on our grasp of the larger history of the comparative method.

HISTORY AND LITERATURE

As in the case of anthropology and sociology, comparative history and comparative literature emerged over roughly the same period in the nineteenth century and in close dialogue with contemporary discoveries in comparative philology. Though it was a clear implication of the Romantic investment in studying both folk and modern literatures in their relationship (particularly in Germany), François Noël, Abel François Villemain, and Matthew Arnold first used the phrase “littérature comparée”/“comparative literature” in French and English in the early nineteenth century as a way to describe the kind of extended and varied reading across the various contemporary and ancient literatures of the world that contributed to modern culture.⁵⁴ As a field of study with its own organs of scholarly publishing, comparative literature was not formally inaugurated until the launching of Hugo Meltzl’s *Acta Comparationis* in the 1870s. Similarly, and as I have previously argued, comparative history—though implicit in the practice of many earlier historians—rose to visibility at mid-century both in response to the growing celebrity of the comparative method in the sciences and comparative philology, and as part of a larger attempt to grasp the problem of revolution-

52. Evan S. Lieberman, “Nested Analysis as a Mixed-Method Strategy for Comparative Research,” *American Political Science Review* 99, no. 3 (2005): 435–52; Skocpol and Somers, “The Uses of Comparative History in Macrosocial Inquiry,” 196; Philip McMichael, “Incorporating Comparison within a World-Historical Perspective: An Alternative Comparative Method,” *American Sociological Review* 55, no. 3 (June 1990): 385–97.

53. Mark Ridley, “Comment,” *Current Anthropology* 35 (1994): 560–61; Ruth Mace and Mark D. Pagel, “The Comparative Method in Anthropology,” *Current Anthropology* 35 (1994): 549–57.

54. René Wellek, “The Name and Nature of Comparative Literature,” in *Discriminations: Further Concepts of Criticism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1970), 1–36. François-Joseph-Michel Noël, *Cours de littérature comparée* (Paris: Le Normant, 1816). See discussions in César Domínguez, Haun Saussy, and Darío Villanueva, *Introducing Comparative Literature: New Trends and Applications* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2015), 2; Susan Bassnett, *Comparative Literature: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1993), 1.

ary history raised in 1789 and renewed in the European revolutions of 1848.⁵⁵ If revolutions, in their irruptive and cyclical character, seemed to resist traditional narrative structures—particularly the story of consistent progress—a comparative analysis, it was hoped, might better determine the structural determinants of revolutions as well as their longer trajectory. (In fact, the differing contexts and dynamics of revolution and collective action remain an important focus of comparative historical study, as can be seen in Roy Bin Wong’s work on the divergence between Chinese and European modernity.)⁵⁶ Yet comparative history was not formally organized as an independent field of academic study until the formation of the Max Weber “circle” and the subsequent founding of the French *Annales* school at the beginning of the twentieth century.⁵⁷ And unlike either anthropology or sociology, twentieth-century comparative history and comparative literature have largely avoided extended consideration of the place of the comparative method in the previous century, generally seeking instead to frame comparativism in fresh terms suited to their specific objects of study. More important was the investment of both comparative history and comparative literature in the nation as a central unit of comparison, whether conceived in terms of national histories, national languages, or national literatures. In both cases, this investment in the nation has a longer history, given the long-standing importance of the nation-state to scholarship and the supplementary investment in national language groups afforded by the philological concern for the languages descended from PIE.

For Marc Bloch, who insisted on the relation of his own approach to both Tylor’s anthropology on the one hand, and Meillet’s comparative linguistics on the other, this focus on comparisons drawn between nation-states felt restrictive by the late 1920s. Though the comparative method meant simply the comparison of “two or more phenomena which appear at first sight to offer certain analogies between them [and the tracing of] their line of evolution, to note the likenesses and differences, and as far as possible explain them,” Bloch explained, “In practice, it has become customary to

55. Devin Griffiths, “The Comparative History of *A Tale of Two Cities*,” *ELH* 80, no. 3 (2013): 811–38. There is a strong distinction between the modern comparative method in historicism—an open procedure that used both similarity and difference to elucidate patterns, and which I have elsewhere termed “comparative historicism”—and either the contrastual comparisons favored by early modern historians, or the stadial histories of the Enlightenment (which used comparison to read nations and events into universal patterns of development). Read in this light, Hegel’s historical writings, though filled with comparisons, are throwbacks to an older model of progressive and universal history. See Griffiths, *The Age of Analogy*.

56. Roy Bin Wong, *China Transformed: Historical Change and the Limits of European Experience* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997).

57. On the Weber circle, see Lawrence A. Scaff, *Fleeing the Iron Cage: Culture, Politics, and Modernity in the Thought of Max Weber* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), chap. 5.

reserve the term 'comparative history' almost entirely for the comparative examination of phenomena that have taken place on different sides of a State, or national, frontier."⁵⁸ And yet, in spite of this "gross simplification" of a more robust comparative method, Bloch's own major example, which studies the formation of feudalism in France and England, follows that model. World War II, conceived as a crisis of international understanding and administration, reinforced this emphasis upon cross-national comparison in Anglo-American historical scholarship, particularly with the formation of area studies programs in the United States.

In continental Europe, by contrast, the quasi-scientific articulation of history as part of the Geisteswissenschaften outlined by Wilhelm Dilthey has encouraged a more sociological approach to history and a clearer articulation of comparativism's longer history. The historian Reinhold Bichler, for example, identifies comparativism as part of a longer Enlightenment tradition of "vergleichende Studien" that runs through the work of Gustav Droysen, Karl Marx, and George Gottfried Gervinus.⁵⁹ Moreover, like Ingmar Weiler, Bichler underlines the relation between the comparative method and what is termed "Analogieschlüssen," or argument by analogy.⁶⁰ In a similar fashion, Luciano Canfora argues that analogy, conceived as the comparison of cases, is central to both history in general and Dilthey's conception of the kind of humanist knowledge produced by the Geisteswissenschaften. As Canfora puts it, "the fact and its comparative study are inseparable," which means that "analogie," understood as the "tendency to reconcile similar facts in order to more perfectly understand them," furnishes the determinative "instrument" of humanist knowledge. Conceived in such capacious terms, analogy and comparison provide a more general and widely applicable method of historical scholarship. Rather than focusing exclusively on cross-national comparison, such a comparativism more closely approximates Bloch's description of a comparative mode that studies "two or more phenomena which appear at first sight to offer certain analogies between them [and the tracing of] their line of evolution, to note the likenesses and differences, and as far as possible explain them."⁶¹

This contrast between continental and Anglo-American styles is evident in Skocpol and Somers's analysis of the different comparative methods deployed by modern

58. Marc Bloch, *Land and Work in Mediaeval Europe* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), 45–46.

59. Reinhold Bichler, "Die theoretische Einschätzung des Vergleichens in der Geschichtswissenschaft," in *Vergleichende Geschichtswissenschaft: Methode, Ertrag und Ihr Beitrag zur Universalgeschichte*, ed. Franz Hampl and Ingmar Weiler (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1978), 1–87.

60. Ibid., 9; Ingmar Weiler, "Der Vergleich und vergleichende Aspekte in der Wirtschafts- und Sozialgeschichte," in Hampl and Weiler, *Vergleichende Geschichtswissenschaft*, 243–84.

61. Luciano Canfora, "Analogie et histoire," *History and Theory* 22, no. 1 (1983): 24. Bloch, *Land and Work in Mediaeval Europe*.

Anglophone histories. Their account of three basic comparative approaches (macro-causal analysis, parallel demonstration, and the contrast of contexts) is convincing, as is their analysis of these three modes as forming a cyclical and “complementary” system of historical scholarship.⁶² But perhaps more striking is the fact that they build their methodological inquiry from the ground up, assembling a typology of approaches through their historiographic study of contemporary scholarship, rather than considering the longer genealogy of thinking about comparativism. A strong case might be made, for instance, that their three categories align with Mill’s methods of agreement, difference, and concomitant variation. And more recently, a concerted transnational effort has been made to find modes of comparative scholarship that do not afford primacy to the integrity of the nation state. Alternatively described as “Cross-national comparative history” (Frederickson), “histoire croisée” (Werner and Zimmermann), or “comparaison asymétrique” (Mariot and Rowell), these approaches emphasize the interplay of historical and global movements that flow between nations and upset the notion of independent national histories.⁶³

A similar impulse to start afresh is apparent in comparative literature, though for different reasons. While Hugo Meltzl and other early practitioners, including A. R. Marsh, G. Gregory Smith, and Frédéric Loliée, understood the study of comparative philology and PIE as foundational to their approach to literary comparison, World War II reset the table.⁶⁴ In its aftermath, scholars like Erich Auerbach and René Wellek emphasized the transnational and cosmopolitan aims of comparative literature. Wellek, for example, turned back to Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and Friedrich Schiller for early articulations of a “Weltliteratur” that would be transnational in character.⁶⁵ More-

62. Skocpol and Somers, “The Uses of Comparative History in Macrosocial Inquiry,” 175, 196.

63. George M. Fredrickson, “From Exceptionalism to Variability: Recent Developments in Cross-National Comparative History,” *Journal of American History* 82, no. 2 (1995): 587–604; Michael Werner and Bénédicte Zimmermann, eds., *De la comparaison à l’histoire croisée* (Paris: Seuil, 2004); Nicolas Mariot and Jay Rowell, “Une comparaison asymétrique: Visites de souveraineté et construction nationale en France et en Allemagne à la veille de la Première Guerre mondiale,” in Werner and Zimmermann, *De la comparaison à l’histoire croisée*, 181–212.

64. Arthur Richmond Marsh, *The Comparative Study of Literature* (Baltimore, 1896); G. Gregory Smith, “Some Notes on the Comparative Study of Literature,” *Modern Language Review* 1, no. 1 (1905): 1–8; Frédéric Auguste Loliée, *A Short History of Comparative Literature*, trans. M. Douglas Power (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1906).

65. Wellek, “The Name and Nature of Comparative Literature.” See also the discussion in Rey Chow, “The Old/New Question of Comparison in Literary Studies: A Post-European Perspective,” *ELH* 71, no. 2 (2004): 289–311. It is true that Meltzl included an epigraph from Schiller in his *Acta Comparationis*; but where Haun Saussy reads this as an indication of the consistent cosmopolitan ambitions of comparative literature, it seems more clearly to mark Meltzl’s effort to articulate a longer

over, in articulating a version of comparative literature in which comparative philology was largely absent, Welles also launched a critique against the “scientism,” “factualism,” and “positivism” of social-scientific approaches to language and literature.⁶⁶ Welles’s critique takes particular force from the powerful evidence of science’s violent applications during World War II, from atomic weapons to Nazi racial science with its explicit adoption of PIE as evidence for the long historical superiority of the “Aryan” race. At the same time, the formalization of comparative literature departments, and their reliance of language requirements, engrained an emphasis on national literatures, and consequently comparisons drawn either between Western literatures, or between what Gayatri Spivak has termed “Europe and its Others.”⁶⁷ The focus on multiple languages is important, insofar as it grounded comparative literature’s transnational turn in the studied interconnection of literatures. Rather than an empty cosmopolitanism, comparative literature would illustrate, in the fashion of Auerbach’s *Mimesis*, the specific cosmopolitan dimensions of past and present literatures and so help to constitute an international polity of literature, a United Nations of culture.

Welles’s critique of nineteenth-century comparative philology was foundational for American-school comparative literature and gained extraordinary force in the analysis of Edward Said, who, along with historians of subaltern studies, identified philology with “Orientalism” and the bureaucratic and academic mechanisms by which Western nations pursued colonial administration in the Middle East, Asia, and elsewhere. While Said admitted the powerful attraction of latter-day comparative literature and its ambitious search for a “vast synthesis of the world’s literary production transcending borders and languages but not in any way effacing their individuality and historical concreteness,” the ongoing critique of the philological study that formed the basis of both Auerbach and Welles’s training made it hard to see by what means this “vast synthesis” might be achieved.⁶⁸ In Spivak’s work, this critique was explored in terms of deconstruction and Jacques Derrida’s method of *différance*. One implica-

lineage for comparative literature beyond its evident relation to comparative philology. Haun Saussy, *Comparative Literature in an Age of Globalization* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), 84. It is hard to argue (though Welles makes a good case) that Schiller or even Goethe were as important to the development of comparative literature in the late nineteenth century as, say, Schlegel or Grimm (who both closely connected comparative philology to the study of distinct literary traditions).

66. René Welles, “The Crisis of Comparative Literature,” in *Concepts of Criticism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1963), 282–83.

67. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “The Rani of Sirmur: An Essay in Reading the Archives,” *History and Theory* 24, no. 3 (1985): 247–72.

68. Edward W. Said, “Introduction,” in *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, by Erich Auerbach (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013), xvi.

tion, as explored by Takayuki Yokota-Murakami, was to argue that philological comparativism is rooted in a genealogical search for a “Platonic” origin: “The yearning for such a transcendental signified is a ‘metaphysical’ move in the Derridean sense, insofar as a transhistorical and transspatial core concept, an Ur-signified, shared by ‘all the humans under God’s eyes,’ is being presupposed.”⁶⁹ Yokota-Murakami’s work can be taken as representative of the turn toward deconstructive and poststructural theory taken by American-school comparative literature in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. In reviewing comparative scholarship through the lens of deconstruction and the instability of the sign, all of the complex history of the comparative method, including also the distinction between genealogical and contextual perspectives, is compressed into the unstable signifier.

Moreover (and even though Yokota-Murakami’s concern is ostensibly a comparison of comparativisms), such accounts tend to obscure the ongoing relation between continental comparative literature and the longer history of philology. As Henry Remak and later Susan Bassnett explained, American research in comparative literature marks one influential school within a wider international field with varying methods and commitments. Moreover, D. W. Fokkema has underlined the substantial difference in continental comparative literature, which is organized under the *Geisteswissenschaften* and therefore puts greater emphasis upon social-scientific hypothesis testing and the theorization of literary systems.⁷⁰ Moreover, Fokkema argues (here anticipating Franco Moretti) that American comparativism looks, from an exterior perspective, to be more deeply committed to particularizing practices of “close reading” and the surprisingly robust legacy of American “new criticism.”

On the one hand, the critique of philology, particularly in American-school comparative literature, has tended to isolate contemporary studies of comparative literature from considering the wide variety of comparative approaches developed by the other disciplines.⁷¹ More than most disciplines, comparative literature continues to worry the basic question, “why compare?” In part, this dilemma is institutional; insofar as comparative literature programs in the United States are formalized through the required study of multiple languages, the cross comparison of literatures in different lan-

69. Takayuki Yokota-Murakami, *Don Juan East/West: On the Problematics of Comparative Literature* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1998), 23.

70. Bassnett, *Comparative Literature*, 31. D. W. Fokkema, “Comparative Literature and the New Paradigm,” *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature* 9, no. 1 (March 1982): 1–18.

71. For recent more interdisciplinary studies of comparative literature, see Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *The Powers of Philology: Dynamics of Textual Scholarship* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003); Eric Hayot, *On Literary Worlds* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

guages becomes a given rather than a methodological choice, which only makes more difficult to explain the national language (or its national literature) as a unit of study. But it is also a problem of disciplinary history. In turning back to German Romantic cosmopolitanism, American-school comparative literature created two problems. First, in largely writing nineteenth-century philology out of the history of comparative literature, scholars disposed of key formulations of the comparative method's goals (formulations which, as we have seen, extend well beyond genealogy, or the positing of "ideals" or "types").⁷² And second (and as I will discuss shortly), this turn toward Goethe and Schiller's "Weltliteratur" helped establish conditions for a skirmish with "world literature" programs, which have become increasingly popular in the United States as a way to institutionalize globalizing, "worlding," or planetary perspectives within the humanities.

On the other hand, the expulsion of comparative philology from the disciplinary history of comparative literature, particularly in the United States, has freed scholars to grapple with comparative approaches drawn from outside normative traditions of Anglo-Western scholarship, allowing especially a pivot to Asia, Africa, and the global South, and to colonial and postcolonial writers who offer fresh perspectives on the object of comparativism. Rey Chow has summarized this as a transition from "old-fashioned comparative literature based on Europe" and a new "post-European comparative studies." Natalie Melas, for instance, has looked to Afro-Caribbean theorist Franz Fanon to disclose models of "relation" that do not presume the superiority of European literature or its cultural standards.⁷³ In a similar fashion, Shu-mei Shih has turned to the work of Martinican theorist Édouard Glissant to articulate a mode of "relational comparison" that does not presume hierarchical relations between its objects.⁷⁴ All represent powerful attempts to move beyond the Western-oriented framework of national literatures, and as such, succeed in presenting an approach that compares (as Bloch put it) "two or more phenomena which appear at first sight to offer certain analogies" without presuming their common "evolution." At the same time, these accounts would benefit from a closer consideration of the complexity of nineteenth-century comparativism, and the way that analogy became a powerful critical tool for

72. Natalie Melas, "Versions of Incommensurability," *World Literature Today* 69, no. 2 (Spring 1995): 275–80, 275. Haun Saussy touches briefly on the connection to nineteenth-century biology and philology in *Comparative Literature in an Age of Globalization*, 12–13.

73. Chow, "The Old/New Question of Comparison in Literary Studies," 301. Natalie Melas, "Versions of Incommensurability," and *All the Difference in the World: Postcoloniality and the Ends of Comparison* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007).

74. Shu-mei Shih, "World Studies and Relational Comparison," *PMLA* 130, no. 2 (2015): 430–38.

both identifying pattern and preserving the “individuality and historical concreteness” emphasized by Said.⁷⁵

But perhaps no aspect of comparative literature would serve to benefit more from this fuller disciplinary history than the debate over its relation to world literature. As set out by David Damrosch and Vilashini Cooppan, the case for world literature follows clearly on the heels of a cosmopolitan “Weltliteratur,” particularly insofar as it can substantiate a correlation between the economic system of global trade (both in Goethe’s time and our own), and literature as a global phenomenon.⁷⁶ The challenge, as they both note, is to articulate a version of “world” literature that is not fatally undermined by this connection to neoliberalism, globalization, and world capitalism, with their attendant critiques. As Haun Saussy persuasively argues, the challenge of world literature lodges in the term “world” itself, and the problem of articulating what sort of totality it designates, a problem displaced through the emphasis on method over object: “By displacing the emphasis from a body of literature to a mode of reading, Damrosch is able to overcome the challenge posed by this extensiveness: world literature is not a body of literature but a way of reading literature, in effect, an experience of the world.”⁷⁷ In contrast to this emphasis on totality, Saussy’s vision of comparative literature finds its strength in a focus on a capacious and supplemental alterity. He envisions a comparative literature that redresses the “provincialism” of an often presentist and Western-focused humanism, working to “recover the means of production and circulation of knowledge in societies different from our own” and to “welcome unlikely topics, disciplinary collisions, things without a name, art forms without a nation.”⁷⁸ As Saussy convincingly demonstrates, the lack of attention to cultural and linguistic specificity in world literature has the necessary effect of eliding crucial difference.

To simplify broadly, these two prospects depend on alternative readings of the point of comparison: whether its object is to elucidate similarity (as part of some larger

75. As one reviewer noted, the complexity of this debate over the meaning of “comparison” in latter twentieth-century comparative literature programs, particularly in the United States, is more complex than I can adequately address here, and this is particularly evident in various institutional reorganizations: Duke University dropped the term “comparative” from its program title; while Yale University introduced a distinct “Literature” program that was neither explicitly comparative nor rooted in a national literature—part of a turn toward world literature described in Cooppan’s account.

76. David Damrosch, *What Is World Literature?* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003); Vilashini Cooppan, “Ghosts in the Disciplinary Machine: The Uncanny Life of World Literature,” *Comparative Literature Studies* 41, no. 1 (2004): 10–36.

77. Saussy, *Comparative Literature*, 86.

78. Haun Saussy, “Comparative Literature: The Next Ten Years” (address at the American Comparative Literature Association conference, March 9, 2014), <https://stateofthedisipline.acla.org/entry/comparative-literature-next-ten-years>.

totality) or difference (as encounter with alterity). Read against a fuller history of the comparative method, it is evident not only that comparativism has always tended to oscillate between relatively closed and open procedures but also that comparison, particularly as organized through analogy, presumes both similarity and difference. The more important question is to ask at what distinct levels are the grounds of similarity conceived (as a method of apprehending a shared world, or the conserved nature of the literary?), and along what axis is difference presumed to operate (in terms of linguistic, national, temporal, or cultural distinction, or some more general category of “otherness” variously theorized in Western scholarship?). Seen in this light, the debate between comparative and world literature is not simply an argument over two different but overlapping formations within the modern university and its curricula (though they are also certainly that), but a part of a wider negotiation of comparativism per se.

Finally, a richer history of the comparative method would help to identify and evaluate comparative proposals on the basis of their genealogy. Franco Moretti’s influential “Conjectures on World Literature,” one of the most widely cited papers in the humanities, presents itself as an innovative new way to theorize how digital humanities (or “distant reading”) might shake up the study of both comparative and world literature.⁷⁹ But in practice Moretti does less to demonstrate what true “distant reading” will look like than to revisit and summarize many of the central methods in the longer history of comparativism. This helps to explain the place of figures like Weber and Bloch in the essay, the emphasis upon historical linguistics, as well as his strong investment in a vocabulary derived from evolutionary biology, including his “law of literary evolution,” “trees,” and “waves.”⁸⁰ As practiced in both this essay and related works like his *Atlas of the European Novel* (1998) and *Graphs, Maps, Trees* (2005), Moretti’s actual method at this period in his career was to compare secondary scholarship in his areas of interest and assemble more general evolutionary or structural accounts of the patterns that these surveys illuminate.⁸¹ Moretti’s approach is not “distant” but rather “middle-distance” reading and most closely resembles the “armchair” comparative an-

79. Franco Moretti, “Conjectures on World Literature,” *New Left Review*, no. 1 (February 2000): 54–68.

80. Though the “waves” are explicitly derived from historical linguistics and the history of technology, the wave model, as I’m sure Moretti is well aware, was derived from invasive speciation and the abiding interest expressed by Darwin and others in what happens when organisms enter new environments and take up new niches. Moretti, I suspect, is a Darwinian at heart (see the marvelous final essay in *Signs Taken for Wonders*). Franco Moretti, *Signs Taken for Wonders: Essays in the Sociology of Literary Forms* (London: Verso, 1983).

81. Franco Moretti, *Atlas of the European Novel, 1800–1900* (New York: Verso, 1998), and *Graphs, Maps, Trees: Abstract Models for a Literary History* (London: Verso, 2005).

thropology of Tylor and Radcliffe-Browne. This is not a complaint but, rather, an observation that demonstrates the lasting power of the comparative method in all of its complexity. Moretti's example proves the basic thesis of this essay: if we study the interdisciplinary history of the comparative method, we may discover untried possibilities for our work.

CONCLUSION

Recently, Natalie Melas, a scholar of comparative literature, has argued that comparativism often plays out along distinct qualitative and quantitative axes: while the former poses questions of similarity, she argues, the latter tends to introduce questions of ranking and differentiation.⁸² In light of the foregoing study, this insight has much wider application. To put it simply: the grounds of similarity and the grounds of difference in comparative study do not need to be the same (and in modern comparativism, they generally are not). A few examples: nineteenth-century linguistics sought to distinguish between systematic phonological sound shifts and modification "by analogy" (when the modification of one set of terms is used as a model for the modification of another).⁸³ The former was understood to produce difference between languages (and hence, was key to reconstructing common ancestral languages), while the latter was seen as cross-contaminating languages, introducing patterns of similarity within languages that tended to obscure true genealogical relations.⁸⁴ Hence genealogical differentiation and analogical similarity were at cross-purposes and were located within different scales of operation (one systematic, the other idiosyncratic). Similarly, in modern evolutionary biology, one often compares specimens to consider the genealogical grounds of difference between superficially similar organisms and the adaptive or contextual grounds of similarity—their convergent adaptation to similar conditions.⁸⁵ So also does classical textual stemmatics,

82. Melas, "Versions of Incommensurability." In her analysis, this is precisely what makes race so peculiar in the colonial context, insofar as it conflates a "qualitative" evaluation of similarity with a "quantitative" judgment of distinction.

83. Raimo Anttila, *Historical and Comparative Linguistics* (Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 1989), 255–57.

84. The "Neogrammarians" sought to reverse this trend arguing (much as Blair once did) that all patterning in language was analogical—derived from the psychological perception and replication of patterns by speakers. See Karl Brugmann and Hermann Osthoff, "Preface," in *Proto-Indo-European Reconstruction's History*, trans. Winfred P. Lehman (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1967), 197–209. My thanks also to Ken Hirschkop for our conversations and his excellent paper, "Analogy and Reason in the Theory of Language," on the role of analogy in both Neogrammarian thought and in the lectures of Ferdinand de Saussure at the annual conference of the Modern Language Association in 2017.

85. See discussions in Paul H. Harvey and Mark A. Elgar, "Why the Comparative Method Works," *Functional Ecology* 3, no. 1 (1989): 126–27; Paul H. Harvey and Mark D. Pagel, *The Comparative*

generally known as the “Lachmann method,” distinguish errata—introduced by specific scribes, typesetters, or other copyists—and the “Urtext” or “archetype”—the common ancestor indicated by shared features and distinctions.⁸⁶

Not only do we need to look between the disciplines, we must look beyond them. In particular, the history of comparativism in the humanities would benefit from a greater investment in popular forms that may have had as much to do with the cultivation of a new and more relativized consideration of the past. For example, we need to consider not only how the study of something like “literature” was reimagined but how literature (like other popular forms) forged new imaginative ways to think about comparativism and relationality, and especially our relation to the past and to other societies.⁸⁷ Similarly, we still have much work to do in considering the contribution of various religious and spiritual traditions to the comparative method, for instance, in shaping the German “higher critics” and comparative mythology. Theology and Christian philosophy clearly impacted the formation of the humanities beyond source criticism and hermeneutics, and we should recognize secularization (recognized as an uneven and indeterminate process) as also a name for the process by which religious modes of affective engagement, belief, social organization, and study are sometimes disentangled from their religious framework and rearticulated in secular institutions and practices. The modern university is the most obvious example.

It is clearly more appropriate to think of the comparative method as a network of filiated practices, each with important histories and contexts, rather than as a stable object or single tradition. To return to Franco Moretti’s argument in “Conjectures on World Literature,” we might study comparativism as an interplay of waves and trees. On the one hand, we may draw analogies between the distinct waves of interdisciplinary contact that share common signatures—a particularly important example here has been exchanges of comparative methodology that have often founded or substantially remade entire fields of study. But we might also study comparativism through trees of influence, through narratives of differentiation that trace the network of those

Method in Evolutionary Biology (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 1–11; Mark D. Pagel, “Inferring the Historical Patterns of Biological Evolution,” *Nature* 401, no. 6756 (1999): 877–84.

86. Sebastiano Timpanaro, *The Genesis of Lachmann’s Method* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

87. Historical fiction, as I have argued, was a key venue for this reimagination of the past, particularly the historical novel. In this light, Wellek’s passing reference to Scott’s influence on German Romanticism, like Turner’s footnote, indicates the ongoing struggle to treat popular forms adequately (Wellek, “Crisis”). Historical fiction not only transformed the literary marketplace, it emerged as a privileged way to reimagine the past through a new “history from below” that juxtaposed ethnic, class, linguistic, and regional formations within time and as over against modernity. See Griffiths, *The Age of Analogy*.

operations over time and study the patterns of these engagements. This would help us place the importance of specific applications and discoveries of both comparison and analogy within the wider humanities. And it would also help caution against the claim that any given mode of comparativism is strictly new.

Two further observations. First, it is clear that the sciences, and subsequently the social sciences (especially sociology), have more quickly internalized and reformulated the comparative method, using specialized vocabularies and increasingly specific disciplinary protocols for research. That process has subsumed the distinction of specific “comparative” fields—there is no longer any discussion of comparative anatomy or comparative sociology as distinct disciplines. By contrast, the humanities have sustained a distinction between specifically “comparative” fields; at the same time they have maintained a less specialized vocabulary for the comparative method itself. Most disciplinary histories of comparative literature, comparative sociology, comparative history, comparative law, and comparative politics date their formation to the late nineteenth through twentieth centuries. And the vocabularies they have developed to designate comparativism—from “relational comparison” to “histoire croisée”—serve more as conceptualizations of the field and its objects than routinized protocols on par with Ragin’s “qualitative comparative analysis.” From one perspective, this is hardly surprising insofar as it reflects the basic distinctions that organize the sciences, social sciences, and humanities. But it is also intriguing insofar as these comparative methods share a common and relatively recent genealogy.

It is also striking that each interdisciplinary exchange tends to resist the larger differentiation of the method and produce moments of greater alignment between fields of study. In reading across the history of these exchanges, it has struck me that a dynamic, described by linguists as “Sturtevant’s paradox,” helps to describe this phenomenon, insofar as the process of historical differentiation is counterbalanced by moments of exchange and conformance. (Edgar Sturtevant first clearly noted that “sound change is regular but produces irregularity; analogy is irregular, but produces regularity.”)⁸⁸ Though disciplinization is a historical process with a relatively consistent direction, it also induces greater differentiation in the comparative method; conversely, interdisciplinary exchanges (organized through analogies) produce similarity. These exchanges brace the argument for understanding the comparative method as an active network of research practices.

There is much left to be done to understand the operation of the comparative method in the modern history of the humanities, and the relationship between its various dispositions. One question is whether the specialization of comparative terminologies pas-

88. Trask, *Historical Linguistics*, 108.

sively reflects upon or actively helps to generate concrete formalizations within specific fields, and consequently whether this helps to isolate the disciplines or (alternatively) helps to organize and, as it were, package those variations of the method so that they are easier to import within other disciplines. I am also curious whether the distinction between comparative approaches that emphasize nature versus nurture, genealogy versus contextual or functionalist description, has value in all applications of the method. The comparative method is not a transhistorical phenomenon; as this study shows, it clearly lives in history. At the same time, the nature versus nurture, history versus system dialectic has proven extraordinarily sticky in its modern applications.

Ultimately, these consistent patterns suggest that the comparative method's engagement with similarity and difference is rarely equal. Some fields have demonstrated a bias toward a consensus account of what comparison discloses, from the nineteenth-century's normative theories of race to the world totality designated by "world literature." Others have emphasized antinormative patterns of differentiation and distinction, from Boas's anthropology to the focus upon "small-N" analyses within comparative sociology and politics. But I do not think we compare only to disclose the patterns of similarity or difference that we already presume. The answer to "why do we compare?" is not "to justify our predispositions": comparativism produces an encounter with similarity and difference that necessarily tests previous models. Rather than an indication of idiosyncratic bias, the present essay suggests that field-specific tendencies toward normative or antinormative outcomes—described by Rens Bod as a contrast between "analogist" and "anomalist" traditions of scholarship—are a product of history and the path dependency of disciplines.⁸⁹ Moreover, if the modern comparative method was defined by a Romantic-era conjunction between formerly distinct analogist and anomalist approaches (marked by the intermixture of the vocabularies of "analogy" and "comparison"), then the continued relations—both historical and formal—that subsist between the various applications of comparativism suggest how those disciplinary methods might be modified, hybridized, and adapted to ask new questions and disclose new patterns.

The comparative method continues to offer a powerful way to grasp what happened in our disciplines after the Enlightenment. Ultimately, I hope this discussion makes a convincing case for the importance of the comparative method to the history of the humanities and persuades other scholars to take up and complicate this account. "After the Enlightenment," after all, is shorthand for "modernity," so let us keep thinking about how comparativism helps to both pose the problem of and explain the modern humanities.

89. Bod, *A New History of the Humanities*, 351.

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