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Introduction

Discussions of comparative history's standing within the historical profession are marked by an inherent inconsistency. Historians have repeatedly endorsed comparative history as an antidote to national history's faults but at the same time expressed skepticism as to the possibility of it being practiced by a considerable proportion of the profession. Endorsement and skepticism are well founded. A historian who limits his study to a single country – in too many cases, his own – is very often unable to perceive the true contours of its uniqueness or to comprehend that the local phenomena he studies are merely variants of some general ones; transnational comparison may help him overcome such shortcomings. On the other hand, comparative history is considered as too demanding. Historians, especially in this era of unprecedented publication, have difficulty keeping abreast with the research done in their own area; how can they be expected to cope with primary sources and secondary literature pertaining to a second area, to say nothing of a third or fourth?

Several outlines of comparative history that practicing historians have published during the past four decades provide a possible way out of this quandary. These outlines distinguish between a "hard," systematic, comparative history, which requires a full mastery of the history of two or more entities and tests hypotheses by examining all the pertinent data, and "soft" varieties, which focus on one entity but widen a historian's horizons by having recourse to secondary literature pertaining to another entity – or to several other entities – so as to gain a wider perspective, think up new questions and elicit insights. The variety that Jürgen Kocka has aptly called the "asymmetrical comparison" is especially promising. For instance, a student writing her dissertation on the Public Works Department in British Palestine in the years 1920–48 might understand the subject of her choice far better were she to delve into the secondary literature dealing with parallel bodies in, say, British India and the Sudan, to say nothing of Britain itself; it stands to reason that such reading would lead her to ask questions about British Palestine's PWD she would otherwise have not formulated, and it is well-nigh certain that only by such comparative reading would she be able to discover the particularities of Palestine's PWD. A comparison with parallel organizations in neighboring French Syria and Lebanon would have a similar effect. Moreover, the adoption of a comparative perspective would free the dissertation from constriction to local history and allow its author to join a larger community of scholars traversing political and linguistic boundaries.

Most articles in the present volume are based on papers delivered at the First and Second Spring Schools in Comparative History held at the Institute for Advanced Studies of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. The first School, directed by Patricia Crone and myself, lasted from 5 to 9 May 2002 and discussed a number of cross-comparisons (i.e., studies comparing societies separated by time and space) and parallel comparisons (i.e., studies comparing contemporary and neighboring societies), as well as comparative history's prospects and pitfalls in general. The second School, directed by S.N. Eisenstadt, lasted from 16 to 19 June 2003 and compared diverse forms of globalization, the basic assumption being that – contrary to theories that regard globalization as an exclusively modern or contemporary phenomenon – partial globalizations have already developed in earlier historical periods and in various regions. The two Schools took place at the height of the second Palestinian uprising, with continuous violence in Jerusalem and elsewhere in the country. A few of the scholars from abroad who had agreed to lecture in the Schools eventually chose to stay home – in one extreme case, just a couple of days before scheduled arrival. Yet these cancellations did not critically affect the Schools, as in almost all cases we were able to recruit spirited scholars to replace the more fainthearted ones. The lecturers who decided to abide by their original commitments and come to a city repeatedly harassed by suicide bombers, surely deserve respect; but I believe that their pursuit of academic activities within so charged an atmosphere gave them also an unforgettable life experience.

The volume opens with my survey of the main outlines for comparative history offered by practicing historians from the late nineteenth century down to the present, tracing the outlines' interconnections and remarkably slow convergence. It is followed by Jürgen Kocka's discussion of the ethical implications of comparative history and the ethical problems to which it – and especially asymmetrical comparisons – may give rise. Diego Olstein concludes this part of the volume by arguing that comparative history is well suited to bridge the gap between monographic and macro-history.

The second part of the volume contains a number of studies that exemplify the potential of symmetrical, asymmetrical, parallel and cross-comparisons. Sabine MacCormack combines her unique mastery of the histories of both Ancient Rome and Pre-Columbian and Spanish America to offer a symmetrical cross-comparison of the Roman and Inca empires. Tamar Herzog provides an asymmetrical cross-comparison between early modern European expansion and present-day globalization, underlining the historian's dilemma between describing a past he or she reconstructs today and a past experienced by contemporaries. Michael Confino offers a basically asymmetrical comparison – partially parallel as far as chronology is concerned – that contrasts serfdom in Russia and slavery in the American

South. Nehemia Levtzion presents a symmetrical, parallel comparison of a large number of Muslim networks of renewal that emerged in the eighteenth century, from West Africa to China and Southeast Asia (although the fact goes unmentioned in this posthumously published article, a systematic comparison of these extraordinarily widespread networks led to the discovery of their common origin). S.N. Eisenstadt studies the modern Japanese political system within the framework of analyzing multiple modernities; his is an asymmetrical, parallel comparison. Peter Baldwin provides a symmetrical, parallel comparison of modern welfare states and raises a series of intriguing questions about their future. Finally, Susan Reynolds argues that comparative studies of feudalism exemplify the pitfalls that beset attempts to compare phenomena described by the same word yet essentially differing from one another. Though such attempts may be stimulating, she contends that instead of comparing entire societies vaguely labeled as feudal, historians may do better by comparing specific elements of different societies and establishing the extent to which they tend to cluster together.

The volume concludes with a report by Elisheva Baumgarten, Esther Cohen and Ruth Roded – on the problems they encountered when they joined forces to teach a course in comparative history.

I would like to express my thanks to the staff of the Institute for Advanced Studies, and especially to Pnina Feldman, Ofer Arbeli, Smadar Bergman, Shani Freiman and Batia Matalov for their help in organizing the Spring Schools in comparative history; to Evelyn Katrak for editing the papers; and to Hai Tsabar and Ram Goldberg of the Magnes Press for their cooperation, to John Hooper for having read the proofs and to Barry Sheridan for the graphic layout of the book.

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Pluralism Versus Homogeneity. Essays in Homage of S.N. Eisenstadt, ed. E. Ben-Rafael and Y. Sternberg (2005), pp. 339-63; and "Political Murder in Russian History. A Comparative Perspective" (forthcoming).

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