BCDSS CONVERSATION 1:

ON COMPARISON AND THE USE OF THEORY

Participants:

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Introduction (Stephan Conermann):

For the study of slavery and dependency in different historical eras and in different regions it is crucial to think about how to *compare* empirical findings across time and space. Long-term comparative history and connected or entangled history have been conceived of as two opposing and competing methodological approaches to study transcultural and global historical processes. Recent debates, however, have focused more and more on the question of how comparisons and connections may be combined in studies with a transcultural or global perspective. We draw on an old claim of micro-historians who seek to correlate the specific with the universal. These historians have sown the seeds of a comparative approach that attempts to constantly pivot between "close ups" on the micro-level and "extreme long shots" (Carlo Ginzburg) on the macro-level, oscillating between "snapshots" and a longue durée perspective.

The BCDSS discussed some of these central concepts in an informal and open format. Participants were asked to reflect about the meaningfulness, the methods and the feasibility of *comparison and the use of theory to their work* (and especially in interdisciplinary projects).

Rudolf Stichweh:[1] If theory is built via concepts and conceptual vocabularies (= networks of concepts) its link to comparison is obvious. Every scientific concept opens comparisons informed by it: to compare the powerful and the powerless, or legitimate and illegitimate power, or power and money and truth as media of social influence, or micro- and macro-power, or formal and informal power. There arise spaces for scientific comparisons as concepts organize spaces of differences or distinctions that lead the way to comparisons. If "power" functions as a relevant theoretical concept, there are many types of power – and many other spaces of distinctions organized by the concept of power. It seems to be the case that every scientific theory can be used for the organization of comparisons – and the inversion is also true: for doing comparative work one needs concepts that organize these comparisons (e.g. a concept of capitalism that allows one to identify "variants of capitalism"). Therefore, there is always a conceptual (= theoretical) structure behind any comparison.

"Strong asymmetrical dependency" is a core concept for the Cluster "Beyond slavery and freedom." It seems plausible that the Cluster does not study short-time fleeting events that are characterized by strong asymmetrical dependency. Instead, the Cluster probably focusses on relatively permanent societal institutions that embed strong asymmetrical dependencies into societies for which these asymmetries are important institutions and have a certain stability. Therefore, the study of strong asymmetrical dependencies can be understood as the study of the population of institutions that are to be identified in historical (premodern and modern) societies. This study is essentially comparative: different institutions of strong asymmetrical dependency are compared with one another or different historical variants of a specific institution (e.g. forced labor or penal colonies and camps or personal servitude) are

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[1] See Rudolf Stichweh, "Values, Norms and Institutions in the Study of Slavery and other Forms of Asymmetrical Dependency," *Dependent. The Magazine of the Bonn Center for Dependency and Slavery Studies*, 2022-1 (2022): 4–8.

compared with one another. In both cases one needs conceptual vocabularies for the cognitive organization of these comparative studies.

Jutta Wimmler: I have two thoughts here. First, an addition: I think historians are in the business of investigating change, so I think many at the Cluster who work on historical case studies study neither short-time events nor relatively permanent societal institutions, but are interested in how societal institutions change over time. This change can be made visible, for example, by investigating a range of "short-time events" over time (e.g. decades) and looking at how a certain practice is altered and then asking what prompted the change. Second, I'm not sure that everyone at the Cluster is doing the kind of comparison suggested here – i.e. comparing empirical case studies. I think many simply work on their specific empirical case study. Traditionally, it is the historians who deliver the case studies (focusing on a specific time and space) and the social scientists who then do the comparing across time and space – a division of labor that is certainly problematic and that we should address. I found William Sewell's book *Logics of History* (2005)[2] quite helpful in rethinking the relationship between social theory and the practice of history writing. With sympathy for both fields, he nevertheless argues that historians need to be more active in producing their own theoretical frameworks for the study of social change.

Claudia Jarzebowski: My sense is that historians are often misunderstood as empiricists. Case studies investigate the micrologies of social history and refer back to a broader framing of historical understanding. This, however, is at times overlooked by social scientists who perceive themselves as universalists. Universalizing, though, produces narrations of history that do not speak to differences (i.e. created through gender, class, religion, age, ethnicity – to name but a few). To make sense of difference is, I argue, the avenue into understanding social change across times and cultures, but also within times and cultures. It is therefore highly theoretical – there is no unintentional history writing.

Admittedly, my questions in history have been shaped by my readings of theory (on trauma, on experience as a category in academia, on creolization as an approach to rethinking our categories, on emotions as a historical force). Certainly, emotions are one of my favourite fields in historical research because emotions – as culture, as what is perceived to be an endurable and just dependency, and what is not – bend to historical contexts and forces. Emotions can be both conceptualized on a theoretical level as an approach into historical social figurations, and on a historical level that will then transform theoretical approaches. The same is true for gender and spirituality. More importantly, though, I think theoretically inspired categories in historical research should be entangled with each other. However, there is no history writing without theory – one should better be aware of one's own conditions of perception and, more importantly, one should, constantly, ask why one is asking what question.

Jutta Wimmler: For me, empiricism ideally comes before theory. Of course, an experienced researcher will usually travel with some theoretical baggage which she struggles to leave

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[2] William H. Sewell Jr., *Logics of History. Social Theory and Social Transformation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

behind. In order to keep one's thinking fresh and not merely repeat what some big (or not so big) names have previously postulated on a certain topic, we should at least try to discard our baggage and not rush into empirical material clutching a specific theory. For historians, this is not an unusual procedure. In the social sciences, it is the mantra of the *grounded theory method* (which is probably one reason why I find it helpful for my own research). So what I do is to jump into my material armed with a *methodology* rather than a theory – which is why I spent my first year at the BCDSS developing a methodological approach rather than a theoretical framework. And that is probably why I don't like to theorize asymmetrical dependencies. Instead, I would prefer to ask: how do we proceed methodically to find out what asymmetrical dependencies are? I'm sure that there are many different approaches at the Cluster – it would be interesting to see if we arrive at similar results.

To avoid misunderstandings: of course, the separation of theory and methodology is not so simple, and I do not want to proclaim that I enter into an analysis in a wholly theory-free state. Theoretical considerations do influence methodology (such as from discourse theory or the history of concepts). What I meant by "theory" just now was primarily a "theory of asymmetrical dependencies." I would personally only draw up such a theory after I had completed my empirical analysis – provided that the results make this feasible. Even then, it must not be my explicit goal, because if it is, this goal will inevitably influence the way I conduct my analysis.

Julia Hillner: I am also a little wary of social theory that seeks to explain large-scale historical change and the "birth of modernity," even where I find it inspiring (e.g. the work of Foucault, especially *Surveiller et Punir*[3]). I hold to the historian's axiom: "Everything is older and more complex than you think." I am more interested in theoretical models that explain social and especially elite reproduction and therefore *non*-change (such as Bourdieu's work; but to be honest, I content myself with the words of the character of Tancredi in the *Gattopardo*: "Everything has to change for everything to stay the same"[4]). I have read extensively on social network theory (such as by Harrison White[5]) and would agree that life can be conceptualized as a pattern of relationships, including of dependency, and that this is a way to think through the connection between the individual and the structural. I found this an important theoretical insight as well as a way to write biography in a more original way. But I also want people to read my work, so I tend not to overload it with theory!

Christian De Vito: I see your point, but I also think it is important to position oneself in broader epistemological issues, for all research is based on a theoretical view, no matter whether that is explicit or implicit in the narrative. Indeed, empiricism, i.e. the alleged complete rejection of theory in favor of "pure" observation, is actually a highly theoretical approach. Thus, in general terms, theory is always important. I additionally think that theory is relevant when it comes to more specific conceptualization: for example, I can hardly see how one could discuss

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[3] Michel Foucault, *Surveiller et punir: naissance de la prison* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975).
[4] Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa, *Il Gattopardo* (Milano: Deltrinelli, 1969): 41: "Se vogliamo che tutto rimanga com'è bisogna che tutto cambi."
[5] Harrison C. White, *Identity and Control. How Social Formations Emerge*, 2nd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

"dependency" without at least having in mind the related theories that have been suggested in the fields of sociology, anthropology, and economics.

Thus, the point for me is not "theory or not theory," but rather: what kind of theory are we talking about? The theory I envisage is a middle-range theory (Merton),[6] that is, one that is constructed and interacts constantly with the empirical data emerging from archival or field research. That is, the importance of theory lies for me in the questions it raises, which can be used as hypotheses for empirical research and, in turn, reshaped and even discarded by the insights from empirical research. In sum: I see a circular relation between empirical and theoretical inputs.

Christoph Witzenrath: I evaluate theories according to the extent to which they summarize or reassess existing scholarship, and the extent to which they raise questions that open up new fields of research. So they must be saturated with research and appropriately supported with evidence and/or invite fresh research. In my personal research work I approach theories in a practical and eclectic manner, i.e. I will draw on them only to the extent that they help me generate new research questions or contribute to a more plausible interpretation of the evidence in source-practical terms. Accordingly, theories must primarily prove themselves in the interpretative part of an analysis of the material. Theories must meet the same criteria that apply to comparisons. Theory work is generative, i.e. new points of view for the further development of theory and for more advanced perspectives emerge from the reflexive working on the source material from different theoretical perspectives. I regard theories as implicit comparisons whose comparative nature must often be made explicit in order to be able to transfer them appropriately.

Christoph Antweiler: I take theory basically as a form of generalization. Any theory goes beyond a single case or some cases, or aims at transcending a case history or case histories. I would argue for a broad approach to theory. Such a broad approach would not include only causal theories. In general, theories are not simply concepts, but means of making something mentally manageable. Theories thus are ways of mentally getting to grips with reality, in German, "Etwas gedanklich handhabbar machen."

A scientific theory should include not only assumptions about reality in general (ontology). It should be explicit about its ontic assumptions as well as about its epistemic, ethical and methodological (meta to methods) premises. These different assumptions should be linked by argument and/or empirical information. My stance would be that there are no theories without generalization and explicit definitions. Metaphors are an important way to discover topics and perspectives, but not theories as such. To give an example, I would regard the notion of -scapes, e.g. "mediascapes," "finance-scapes" as productive metaphors, but not as theories. The same holds for narratives.

Rudolf Stichweh: Science is about concepts (e.g.: gravitation, force, mass, romanticism, power, transcendence, style, identity) and the interrelations among concepts. "Theory" normally means doing intentional work on the interrelation of concepts. In historical sciences

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[6] Robert K. Merton, *Social Theory and Social Structure* (New York: Free Press, 1949).

you will rarely find laws and mathematical relations among concepts. As concepts are not defined by mathematical relations, theoretical work in the historical sciences mostly consists in trying to find a semantic understanding of concepts, and the theory finally built on this basis is an *interpretive network of concepts*, the causally relevant linkages built into the ties in the network of concepts.[7] To work on and with theory then means to try out some conceptual substitutions (for example: What happens if you substitute "exchange" for "power" as the core concept of a social theory?) and to reinterpret concepts which are part of such a network of concepts. If one makes use of such an understanding of "theory" as is proposed here, it is easily to be seen that theory is universal in science. There is no science without significant theoretical elements. There is a division of labor between those whose primary interest is theory building (as a community of specialists) and those trying to find out some unexpected truths by making dogmatic or eclectic use of well-established theories in empirical research. But there is no science without theory. Science can't be done without a conceptual structure, and in a conceptual structure theory is always implied.

Claudia Jarzebowski: Theory never trumps empirical research – but empirical research that lacks theoretical reflection falls short of its possibilities and, yes, necessities. However, differences also emerge. In particular, as it appears, historical disciplines and social-science approaches differ in two significant respects: Where sociologists and anthropologists tend to believe in theory as a facilitator of epistemological progress, representatives of historical disciplines seem to adhere to a more cautious trust in theories. Why is this so? It is my sense that different understandings of what serves as a theory are at stake, also among those who work more historically. How can theories and methodologies be demarcated from one another? And are there limits to historization, at which theory might help us to go further?

Recently, I have encountered many young scholars, including members of the BCDSS, who work with *grounded theory*. This approach, I think, embraces the above question of how we might possibly reconcile empiricism and theory. Theory, according to this line of thinking, is not only informed by field work and empirical studies, but also adjusts itself accordingly. I am not yet convinced that this is the new "silver bullet," the solution to everything – but I do think that we need to overcome that somewhat artificial divide between theory and empirical studies. And it definitely helps to envisage research in history as theoretically relevant.

Rudolf Stichweh: In my understanding every social scientist, historian and philologist is involved in the study of sociocultural evolution. That implies that there are institutions in all human social systems. But the stability of institutions is not something material and immobile. Institutions are based in expectations that are incessantly either affirmed or modified in communication events. Even if participants intend to affirm an institution, it may happen that by a certain inflection they give to what they say they unintentionally modify the institution they claim they're being faithful to. The high probability of social change arising on the basis of microdiversity and microchange is what I, together with most institutionalists, would call sociocultural evolution. Regarding comparison my argument is similar. Of course, one can focus one's work on a specific case. But already the term "case" points to comparison. It is a

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[7] Cf. Ernst Mayr, *What Makes Biology Unique. Considerations on the Autonomy of a Scientific Discipline* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004): ch. 5, on evolutionary biology as a historical science based on concepts rather than on laws.

case of something (murder, corruption, democracy). To be sure that the object of study is such a case of something one has to compare it to other cases that are similar or different. And one has to know the boundaries where the case one studies changes into something belonging to another class of cases.

Pia Wiegmink: This attention to implicit terminologies like "case studies," and related implicit methodologies, is important. When I first thought about the question of my relation to practices, theories and methods of comparing, my immediate response was "I am not a comparatist (in my field this would mean 'Vergleichende Literaturwissenschaftlerin,' a comparative literary studies scholar), I do not compare." On second thought, however, I realized that, yes, of course, when I analyzed antebellum free African American women's life writing, I compared this body of literature with the more prominent genre of the African American slave narrative. In a similar vein, in order to be able to identify the literary characteristics of German immigrant antislavery literature, I had to compare these works to more canonical works of American antislavery literature. So, although methodological reflections on modes of comparison are often not explicitly articulated, analyzing literary works with regard to their form, genre, aesthetics, and cultural relevance is also a mode of comparing because identifying features and characteristics includes pointing out similarities and differences and thus establishing connections with and relations to other works.

Julia Hillner: Indeed, historians all implicitly compare, and I am no exception (to paraphrase Durkheim: "comparison is history itself"[8]). Comparison over time – of, say, legislation on the punishment of slaves in the second as opposed to the fourth century CE – is instrumental to tracking historical change. The concept of intersectionality, how individual and collective experiences are structured by different overlapping aspects of identity and identification, is impossible to apply without comparison between these experiences (or how they are represented). Like everyone else, I could do more on articulating methodological premises in my work (for example, if social manifestations I am looking at are really formally comparable, especially if the source base is very different, as is the case even for second and fourth-century slavery).

I cannot say, however, that I have ever explicitly applied "comparative methods" as they are laid out by practitioners of the craft: "formal/typological," "encompassing," "incorporating" etc. An example of the first would be comparison of criminal punishment in Rome and China. Comparison of these kinds, especially of Rome and China, are quite *en vogue* in Roman studies right now, especially thanks to Walter Scheidel.[9] It seems to me, however, that recent secondary literature in early modern and modern history (and especially due to the "global turn") strongly pushes against "formal," "macro" comparison that treats units of comparison as independent and abstracts from them formal structures to establish similarities and

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[8] Durkheim made the comment with regard to sociology: "La sociologie comparée n'est pas une branche particulière de la sociologie ; c'est la sociologie même," Émile Durkheim, *Les règles de la méthode sociologique* (Paris: Les Presses universitaires de France, 1986 [1895]): 137.
[9] See for example Walter Scheidel, ed., *State Power in Ancient China and Rome* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015) and Walter Scheidel, ed., *Rome and China: Comparative Perspectives on Ancient World Empires* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

differences (as developed by Bloch and other Annales scholars).[10] Rather, these historians advocate looking for cases that are part of the same structural processes but manifest these processes differently, or for cases that are part of the same structural processes and mutually influence each other (this is nicely laid out in Tomich, "Small Islands" and see the recent Miller Lecture by Rafael Marquese).[11]

The reservations about "formal" comparisons seem to arise because a) the difference between modern and pre-modern history is perceived to be so great that diachronic comparison is meaningless (e.g. pre-modern and modern slavery are completely different phenomena/concepts); b) the modern world is perceived to be (more) interconnected, so formal, synchronic comparison that abstracts structures from case studies is artificial. Of course, among ancient and medieval historians there is (and has always been) much emphasis on the interconnectedness of the worlds they study too, naturally, due to the absence of "nation-states." So "encompassing" or "incorporating" comparisons are implicitly applied here too (see e.g. recent works on Rome's engagement with the "Indian Ocean World").[12] It should however be noted that these methods seem to have been predominantly developed to explain the rise of modern capitalism/racialized slavery, so they need to be adapted to deal with other situations. The downside of prioritizing this kind of comparison is that everyone stays in their historical period/corner, if not necessarily region, unless we practice "reception studies," e.g. the use of classical knowledge in the making of the modern world. I would still think that "formal," "macro" comparison has its place too, even if, or exactly because, it is just about establishing historical uniqueness and historical contingency. As Stefan Berger says, "No other historical method is so adept at testing, modifying and falsifying historical [and sociological, actually] explanation than comparison."[13] In other words, comparison can surprise (which is fun), invites us to reflect on our assumptions and to note *absences* in our own case studies. It seems to me, however, that this can only be achieved through conversation and collaboration, not through individual research.

Pia Wiegmink: I totally agree. If we want to examine these various forms of dependencies across time and space in order to propose "'strong asymmetrical dependency' as an alternative new key concept including all forms of bondage,"[14] individual research on specific forms of dependencies at a particular time and in a particular geographic region needs to be

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[10] On this, see William H. Sewell, Jr., "Marc Bloch and the Logic of Comparative History," *History and Theory* 6, no. 2 (1967): 208–18.

[11] Dale Tomich, "Small Islands and Huge Comparisons: Caribbean Plantations, Historical Unevenness, and Capitalist Modernity," *Social Science History* 18, no. 3 (1994): 339–58; Rafael de Bivar Marquese, Asymmetrical Dependencies in the Making of a Global Commodity: Coffee in the Longue Durée, Joseph C. Miller Memorial Lecture Series 15 (Berlin: EB Verlag, 2023).

[12] See Raoul McLaughlin, *The Roman Empire and the Indian Ocean: The Ancient World Economy and the Kingdoms of Africa, Arabia and India* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword Military, 2014); Matthew A. Cobb, *Rome and the Indian Ocean Trade from Augustus to the Early Third Century CE* (Leiden: Brill, 2018).

[13] Stefan Berger, "Comparative and Transnational History," in *Writing History: Theory and Practice*, ed. Stefan Berger, Heiko Feldner and Kevin Passmore, 3rd ed. (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020): 296.

[14] Julia Winnebeck, Ove Sutter, Adrian Hermann, Christoph Antweiler and Stephan Conermann, "On Asymmetrical Dependency," *BCDSS Concept Paper* 1, Bonn Center for Dependency and Slavery Studies (2021): 3, https://www.dependency.uni-bonn.de/images/pdf-files/concept-papers/bcdss_cp_1-_on-asymmetrical-dependency.pdf [accessed 01.08.2022]. A revised version of this paper ("The Concept of Asymmetrical Dependency") has been accepted for publication in *The Journal of Global Slavery* and will appear in 2024.

complemented by hermeneutic strategies and modes of inquiry which bring these individual findings together. To me, comparison seems well suited to create these kinds of *joint* research results: After all, the BCDSS argues that strong asymmetrical dependency is a defining characteristic of all human societies. Both research groups are thus interested in identifying continuities rather than ruptures and changes – a focus, I must say, I have not yet entirely come to terms with because I think it is equally important to look at forms of resistance to and attempts of overcoming asymmetrical dependency. With regard to slavery, one can say that slavery existed in various forms at different times, but so did resistance to slavery. People did not just accept their enslavement.

Jutta Wimmler: Is this really a problem though? If you say that resistance to SAD also existed in various forms at different times, then this is a continuity of sorts. One might look for common characteristics and strategies of resisting that are trans-generational "stabilized practices," or appear at different times and places, and see these as typical byproducts of SAD. Or if there are differences, then these can be explored too.

Pia Wiegmink: I guess what I wanted to say is that I would like the Cluster to pay more attention to modes of resistance to dependency. To me, resistance to dependency is part and parcel of asymmetrical dependency. One did not exist without the other. Hence, I think the Cluster's focus on strong asymmetrical dependency as a defining and recurring feature of premodern societies offers only a partial perspective, as it obfuscates that these conditions and structures of dependency were not "stabilizing practices" in that they were simply accepted, but that they were highly contested and challenged by the enslaved and dependent. Strong asymmetrical dependency is not an innate condition but the result of constant power struggles.

Claudia Jarzebowski: As a historian I would like to add that resistance is a loaded term and oftentimes hard to detect. It depends upon who defines resistance when. In early modern Europe and north America, resistance to authorities was equaled with resistance to God or, in other cultures, to other spiritual authorities, and therefore seen as a sin. When the peasants claimed certain rights during the Peasant's War (1524/25 in German-speaking territories) they made it very clear that their claims did not question the authorities, but what they called the worldly abuses of the temporal power lent to the masters and authorities by God. They explicitly did not resist the system, but accidental abuses that they experienced as violating – in this case Christian – norms. It is this double-binding self-perception that complexifies any investigation of resistance in history, and which should inform comparative studies of resisting acts in history.

Christoph Antweiler: Returning to Julia's points about forms of comparison, I regard as the most general insight that to compare is not to make equal, to equalize. A comparison is a mental operation whereby two or more entities are perceived and cognitively related to one another. Comparing as a mental operation is not the same as unifying or equalizing. Any comparison – empirical or theoretical – is open to reveal sameness, difference, or partial similarity. Comparison is a universal, ubiquitous cognitive practice as well as an (often implicit) universal evaluative practice. Comparing as a practice stands in relation to other practices:

classifying, subsuming, measuring, differentiating, and evaluating.[15] These other practices are similar to the practice of comparing and to some extent are elements within a comparative enterprise. In addition, when we want to describe a certain similarity between two phenomena we often employ analogies. We see similarities, but we want to emphasize that the phenomena being compared are not variants or versions of the same thing. But from a philosophical point of view, analogy is not just a relation of some similarity. Analogy is a comparison of very dissimilar things, where you can then find – despite mostly differing aspects or traits – a specific sameness which is interesting or revealing. Even within academia, there will always be discussions about legitimate forms of comparison. In principle anything can be compared, even apples and oranges. Any empirically informed comparison is open to revealing different results: sameness, similarity, or difference.

Having said this, there are obviously specific modes of comparing, for example cross-cultural comparison. Studies from cultural anthropology are especially useful to obtain a view into human psychic functioning worldwide – beyond WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrial, Rich, Democratic) people.[16] Cross-cultural comparison is one of the main methods (beyond fieldwork) of cultural anthropology. Existing primary data from fieldwork reports are used for a secondary analysis to develop or test cross-cultural hypotheses. Cross-cultural comparison is mostly used as a contrast-enhancing comparison. Thus, this approach is also used to search for characteristics shared by some, many or even all human societies. These apply on the level of collectives, not individuals (pan-cultural patterns). Anthropologists have been able to empirically establish hundreds of traits shared by all or nearly all societies (universals, human universals). Radical critics say that cross-cultural comparison is wholly unfeasible because of translation problems.

Christoph Witzenrath: For this purpose, what works best is comparing cases that have as many similarities in common as possible: cases in which significant environmental and social factors were either as similar as possible or where differences were controlled for. Environmental factors make comparisons especially difficult; however, taking them into account in relation to contemporary technologies and world views renders comparison productive, and is a central element for achieving a perspective that goes beyond the inevitable Eurocentricity (US-centricity, Indocentricity, Afrocentricity or whatever, depending on one's given environment and horizon of experience, which one can never wholly escape by means of reflection). Other factors play a role, such as institutions, which in turn need be examined against the backdrop of and in relation to environmental factors: for example, the incidence of large villages, swamps and impassable forests per square kilometre, the frequency of climate fluctuations and crop failures, seasonal impassability, the correlated orientation of main trade routes and pastoral-nomadic seasonal migrations, the virulence of pandemics in winter, etc. Diachronic comparisons must again take into account changing

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[15] See for example, Angelika Epple, Anje Flüchter and Thomas Müller, eds., "Praktiken des Vergleichens," *Working Paper des SFB 1288* 6, Universität Bielefeld, SFB 1288, https://pub.uni-bielefeld.de/download/2943010/2943628/WorkingPaper6_SFB1288.pdf [accessed 01.08.2022].
[16] For a discussion of WEIRD people see Joseph Henrich, Steven J. Heine and Ara Norenzayan, "The Weirdest People in the World?" *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 33, no. 2–3 (2010): 61–83, DOI: 10.1017/S0140525X0999152X. For a critical discussion of Henrich, Heine and Norenzayan see Aaron Lightner, Zachary H. Garfield and Edward H. Hagen, "Religion: The Weirdest Concept in the World?" *Religion, Brain & Behavior* 12, no. 3 (2021): 290–98, DOI: 10.31234/osf.io/58tgd.

technologies and their interaction with shifting environmental factors before institutional comparisons can be made.

Jutta Wimmler: When reading the SFB concept paper, I was particularly intrigued by its concern with how specific practices of comparison result in "communities of practice." When the authors detail types of comparison, they also illustrate that comparison is not a neutral and "natural" activity, but one that has a specific character that is subject to change. In short, our comparative practices are culturally specific, and they have a history. This spoke to me, as I keep coming across practices of comparison in my analysis of European travellers' writings on Africa. Especially in the nineteenth century, there was a tendency to compare "slavery" temporally and/or spatially. For me, the implications of this observation are extremely relevant – the modes of comparing and the changes to comparative practice in my sources stand out. This, by the way, is already the first result of the analysis: comparative practices emerged as research objects – things to be studied and investigated – from the material (without my having planned beforehand to address comparative practices). I have since found David Chidester's work useful, who argues that modes of comparing "religion" really emerged on the "frontier" (in this case, in Southern Africa), and were only later picked up in Europe by the so-called "armchair scholars."[17] Chidester also points out that on this "frontier," African actors participated in these practices of comparison. Of course, they are difficult (but not impossible) to detect in the sources and often remain nameless. Indeed, it was in contact with non-European (or rather, non-Christian!) cultures that such comparative practices became vital tools of understanding and were further refined. Social theory has its origins in these kinds of comparative practices (think of Durkheim as an example) – it is important not only to be aware of this, but also to investigate the historical genesis of these practices in order to recognize the baggage this comes with.

I suspect, however, that our current discussion is concerned with something else, i.e. with how we each understand and weigh comparing in our own academic practice. It is, of course, relevant to me whether the discourse in my sources – the way the *term* slavery is being used – is specific to the corpus I investigate. I would hypothesise that European texts about America, Asia or Europe use the term in basically similar ways, which does however not at all preclude the possibility of minor variances or specifics. For me, the great significance of the Cluster is the chance for a dialogue with colleagues who investigate completely different regions, times and subjects. This makes it possible for me to compare my findings on a broader level.

Christoph Antweiler: This is an important asset of the Cluster for sure, but the BCDSS also aims explicitly to establish a concept of dependence/dependency that is suitable for comparison. Thus, a descriptive terminology is especially important for the BCDSS, due to the fact that according to our research plan we intend to develop an approach not biased towards Atlanto-centric examples or the Greco-Roman slaveries. In looking for general structures and processes we try to avoid absolutist universalism. Our approach should not over-generalize experiences from our own contemporary cultural or historical context. We aim at an approach that avoids any forms of Eurocentrism or Atlanto-centrism as well as other forms of nostro-

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[17] David Chidester, *Savage Systems. Colonialism and Comparative Religion in Southern Africa* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1996).

centrism. By implication, our basic assumptions thus should not be limited to evidence of dependencies produced in WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrial, Rich, Democratic) academic settings. This caveat arose in comparative psychology but holds for most other fields as well. Our current knowledge of the human psyche is based on a very limited basis of studies almost all done by Western researchers with Western subjects in experimental settings.

Where worldwide comparative data is available, WEIRD societies consistently occupy the extreme ends of distributions. This makes these people often the worst subpopulations one can study with the aim of generalizing about humans. Thus, if we compare, say, Atlantic slavery or Roman slavery with e.g. Asian cases or African cases, we will have to ascertain that the *tertium comparationis* which we are developing does not already have a privileged relationship with Atlantic slavery. The problem with Atlantic slavery as an implicit prototype "case" is that Atlantic slavery tends to be seen only in its "typical," severe or even extreme, cases, whereas current historical research shows that Atlantic slavery had many facets as regards forms, circumstances and contexts. The same holds for ancient Greek and Roman slaveries. The danger is that we (a) essentialize the historically best-known forms of dependency into a single case or prototype. This entails the danger that we (b) think of other forms as "deviations." All these dangers are to be avoided if we want to establish a truly de-provincialized knowledge about dependencies.

Eva Lehner: My practical standpoint on the tertium comparationis would be the following: Comparisons are part of my research and my historical analysis. In my Ph.D. dissertation, I examined different confessional church registers from parishes (villages and towns) in early modern southern Germany and compared them in different ways. The main question for this comparison was, Which categories did the priests use and develop to identify people? In my new project, I want to compare court records from different Dutch colonies (e.g. Cape Town). The main question for the comparison is how strong asymmetrical dependencies shaped bodies and were inscribed in bodily practices (enslavability). Depending on the research question and the sources, I would say I compare different things on different levels. I closely read the sources and developed the categories for my comparison (tertium comparationis) in a dialogue between the sources (empirical material) and my analytical tools. I try to use the analytical categories/tools in an open and active dialogue with the historical material. E.g., the body would be the analytical category and relatively flexible tool I use to read and analyze the criminal records, but with an open mind in terms of what the body meant in the sources: Which body practices were essential? How is the body interlinked with dependency/slavery? It could also include the question of how historical actors compared and constructed the tertium comparationis (see the Working Paper "Grundbegriffe für eine Theorie des Vergleichens"[18]). Who compared which bodies? Which bodies became enslavable? What role did comparison play in this process? Etc.

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[18] Ulrike Davy, Johannes Grave, Marcus Hartner, Ralf Schneider and Willibald Steinmetz, "Grundbegriffe für eine Theorie des Vergleichens. Ein Zwischenbericht," *Working Paper* 3, SFB 1288 "Praktiken des Vergleichens. Die Welt ordnen und verändern," https://pub.uni-bielefeld.de/download/2939563/2939604/WorkingPaper3_SFB1288.pdf [accessed 27.01.2023].

Christian De Vito: It seems to me that the problem we are all grappling with here is the degree to which one has to express his/her general understanding of the historical processes and historical change. I see two alternative approaches: the taxonomical (or macro-analytical) and the processual (or micro-analytical). The first approach implies the pre-definition of the categories and the spatial and temporal units of research. The second approach looks at the ways categories, spatial and temporal units are constructed historically (including by the scholars themselves), as in Eva's example. To me, the two approaches are mutually exclusive, not complementary. I personally think one has to position him/herself in this broader discussion.

The way scholars see the historical processes shapes the kind of comparison they make in their research. Thus, macro-analytical historians compare across pre-defined temporal and spatial units through their pre-defined categories and "factors." Processual comparisons are radically different, as they start with a question, and study the variations and similarities in the answers. For example, you can pose the question, "How did punitive practices produce and reproduce dependency?" to virtually any historical context. Starting from there, you can then enter the specificities of each context; analyse the ranges of possibilities you find in each of them (e.g. imprisonment was relevant in one context and irrelevant in another, but both contexts used capital punishment, paternal "correction" and flogging); and then proceed in more detail, looking at the understanding and experiences that the historical actors attributed to each form of punishment, and therefore to each combination (did they see flogging as a "slave" punishment or was it extended to other members of the society? And if two societies or contexts both used flogging, did they see it in similar or different ways? For example, was flogging in one context legitimized by religion, and in another with rather military-related arguments? Etc.).

The importance of this processual way of comparing also lies in that it prevents the essentialization of "societies," "cultures," and categories more generally, as it happens necessarily in macro-analytical comparisons. What might be key to the elite members in a given context might not have been relevant to the subaltern members of the same context, or to some sub-groups or individuals within those groups. After all, historical processes and historical change are the outcomes of collaboration, negotiations and conflicts among different individuals and groups, so one should never imagine that "France" or "the Roman Empire" were homogenous units that can be compared with other allegedly homogenous (but, in reality, socially and spatially deeply fragmented) units like "Britain" and "the Persian Empire" respectively. For this reason, it is important to assess the specific "pertinent contexts" for asking and answering the research questions: not entire polities or empires, but specific commercial corridors, or diasporing groups, or bundles of sites that were relevant to the lives of certain groups and individuals etc. Those "pertinent contexts" could be the "units" for processual comparisons of the kind I have briefly sketched above.

Claudia Jarzebowski: We all obviously agree that comparison is an innate feature of humanness (in clear distinction to other forms of life), but I should point out that I do think comparison is not self-explanatory. The same is true for culture: it is not a self-explanatory term one should use without making transparent the preconditions and theories one draws from. For me, culture and comparison are best brought together in what has been termed cultural anthropology by the members of the so called "Boas school": their focus on cultural relatedness inspired a school of comparative studies that worked against the notion of

cultural hierarchies (dictated by time, birth, space) and had in mind more of a network approach: Comparison in order to find out more about how overarching fields (sexuality, kinship, magic/spirituality, raising children, to name but a few of their tertia) interact, are connected to each other (being connected has been defined by Benjamin Whorf – and I adhere to that – as the opposite of being accidentally associated).[19] This line of thinking was then further developed by historians who conceptualized comparative history as connective history, an approach I embrace. One thing I would like to stress here has been raised by Rajagopalan Radhankrishnan[20] in extenso, and I think he is absolutely right: Why does a comparison make sense to you, but maybe not to the social and cultural figurations/people you compare something with? In other words: We do need to define the standards of a given period in order to make comparisons. Modern standards and expectations do not help to historicize and understand and to compare societies in their own time and contingency. One last thing I must stress: Cultural comparisons can also take place within one social figuration, a comparison e.g. based on the tertia of religion, food, labor, knowledge and e.g. marriage or partnering and inheritance practices.

In my view it makes much sense to develop and conceptualize dependency studies as a starting point or a base from which to rethink what we mean when we say "trans" and "culture."[21] Historical comparisons have served to establish and stabilize hierarchies (and dependencies). Inherent to this historical practice of comparison (of which we mostly know the European side, as it were) was the emergence of a "we" and an "other" (see also Edward Said[22] and his postcolonial critics). This, I think, is the most important starting point for rethinking cultural comparison from the perspective of dependency studies. There is a danger of stabilizing these notions if we are not forced to rethink the historical comparisons on which our notions of culture, the "we" and the "other" are built. Dependency and slavery studies ask for a reconfiguration under the auspices of including that which has been conceptualized as the "other" into the "we."

Pia Wiegmink: I very much agree and I would plead that we engage with postcolonial theory more thoroughly. One way of reading the slogan "beyond slavery and freedom" is – as has been done in the original BCDSS-application[23] – to propose the term "asymmetrical dependency" as an alternative to the binary slavery/freedom because asymmetrical dependencies allow us to describe and study social formations with terms that did not emerge from western Enlightenment thought.

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[19] See Charles King, *The Reinvention of Humanity: A Story of Race, Sex, Gender and the Discovery of Culture* (London: Bodley Head, 2019).

[20] Rajagopalan Radhakrishnan, "Why Compare?" in *Comparison: Theories, Approaches, Uses*, ed. Rita Felski and Susan Stanford Friedmann (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013): 15–33.

[21] Antje Flüchter, "Einleitung. Der transkulturelle Vergleich zwischen Komparatistik und Transkulturalität," in *Monarchische Herrschaftsformen der Vormoderne in transkultureller Perspektive*, ed. Wolfram Drews, Antje Flüchter, Christoph Dartmann, Jörg Gengnagel, Almut Höfert, Sebastian Kolditz, Jenny Rahel Oesterle, Ruth Schilling and Gerald Schwedler (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015): 1–31.

[22] Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Routledge, 1978), for a critique see: Bernhard Lewis, "The Question of Orientalism," New York Review, 24.06.1982, https://www.nybooks.com/articles/1982/06/24/the-question-of-orientalism/ [accessed 05.11.2022].

[23] I am thinking here in particular of how writings such as Dipesh Chakrabarty's postcolonial critique *Provincializing Europe* (2000) served as a starting point to rethink the relation (and construction) of notions of "freedom" and what has been often posed as its opposite, "slavery." Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

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