

# The Analytical Concept of Asymmetrical Dependency

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## Abstract

In response to critiques of the ‘slavery versus freedom’ binary and its limitations, researchers at the international Bonn Center for Dependency and Slavery Studies (BCDSS—[www.dependency.uni-bonn.de](http://www.dependency.uni-bonn.de)) at the University of Bonn tentatively employ the analytical concept of ‘asymmetrical dependency’ in their investigations of coercive social relations, such as slavery, debt bondage, and servitude. In this paper, we discuss some basic theoretical assumptions that undergird this analytical concept. In outlining an approach to asymmetrical dependency that is grounded in social and cultural theory, our goal is to provide a framework within which individual researchers can situate their projects and further develop their theoretical understanding of this phenomenon. To this end, we first introduce the analytical concept of asymmetrical dependency and explore its potential in light of the current state of research of slavery studies and related fields. We then conceptualize asymmetrical dependency as a dynamic relational process and employ a chiefly praxeological methodology to identify and describe some fundamental dynamics of these relations. Finally, we argue that the interdisciplinary study of asymmetrical dependency requires a broad practice of comparative analyses. We, therefore, consider several recent critiques of and models for comparison while relating them to the analytical concept of asymmetrical dependency we propose.

## Keywords

slavery – dependency – bondage – unfree – coerced labor – serfdom – indentured servitude

This paper introduces basic theoretical assumptions related to the concept of asymmetrical dependency, which has been proposed as a resource for analyzing dependency relations.<sup>1</sup> Any theoretical framework developed for slavery and dependency studies as a whole must be suitable for diverse methodologies and projects, including explorations of historical, archaeological, and contemporary forms of asymmetrical dependency. In the following pages, our deliberations chiefly rely on theoretical approaches which focus on ‘practices.’ Inspired

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1 The authors did not only benefit from each other’s individual contributions and the joint discussions, but also immensely from the feedback and input of several critical readers. We would like to offer our thanks to many of the members of the BCDSS, particularly Sinah Kloß, Christian De Vito, Claudia Jarzebowski, and Pia Wiegink.

by theoretical assumptions of what has been called the 'New Materialism,' we consider not only relations between people but also those between people and non-human entities, such as material artefacts, animals, gods, and spirits. At the same time, we do not engage in detail with existing theoretical debates over different approaches to practice theory<sup>2</sup> or the various challenges connected to a "flat ontology."<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, at the present stage of conceptual development, strict adherence to a single theoretical perspective might further divide, rather than foster creative connections between, the variegated research projects dedicated to phenomena of dependency. The goal of this paper, therefore, is not to provide a single comprehensive or empirically saturated account of asymmetrical dependency. Rather, we utilise specific aspects of different theoretical approaches that are grounded in social and cultural theory in order to sketch a theoretical framework that encourages researchers to consider a broader spectrum of elements and processes as crucial for the formation of social relations of asymmetrical dependency. Moving forward, we hope the reflections offered in this paper might help researchers to position their individual projects within existing theoretical frameworks and to further develop their own theoretical understanding of asymmetrical dependency.

The first part of this paper (1) introduces the analytical concept of asymmetrical dependency and briefly discusses its potential over and against the traditional binary opposition between slavery and freedom for slavery and dependency studies in light of the current state of research. The second (2) and third (3) parts of the paper address two issues that its authors consider crucial resources for understanding the concept of asymmetrical dependency and its application: Part 2 approaches asymmetrical dependency by combining practice theory and the 'New Materialism' with more traditional perspectives of critical theory and consequently considers a variety of actors and elements as involved in such local and translocal social relations. Part 3 deals with the challenge of comparison encountered when applying the concept of asymmetrical dependency. It does so by addressing current critiques of comparison and

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- 2 See Schatzki, Theodore R., Karin Knorr-Cetina, and Eike von Savigny, eds., *The Practice Turn in Contemporary Theory* (London: Routledge, 2001); Elias, Friederike, Albrecht Franz, Henning Murmann, and Ulrich Wilhelm Weiser, eds., *Praxeologie: Beiträge zur interdisziplinären Reichweite praxistheoretischer Ansätze in den Geistes- und Sozialwissenschaften* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014); Schäfer, Hilmar, *Praxistheorie: Ein soziologisches Forschungsprogramm* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2016).
  - 3 Schatzki, Theodore R., "Practice Theory as Flat Ontology." In *Practice Theory and Research: Exploring the Dynamics of Social Life*, eds. Gert Spaargaren, Don Weenink, and Machiel Lamers (London: Routledge, 2016), 28–42.

discussing recently developed theoretical approaches. Part 4 summarises the main insights of the paper and explores possible avenues for future research.

## 1 The Analytical Concept of Asymmetrical Dependency

### 1.1 *Asymmetrical Dependency and the Binary Opposition of Slavery and Freedom*

The analytical concept of asymmetrical dependency seeks to replace the traditional binary opposition of ‘slavery versus freedom’ still prevalent in slavery studies with the much broader analytical concept of asymmetrical dependency, which aims to encompass all forms that human bondage and coercion have taken over time. This concept allows for the observation of social relations of asymmetrical dependency in all human societies, past and present. These can be identified cross-culturally and should, therefore, be regarded as an important aspect of the “human experience”<sup>4</sup> in most local and cultural contexts.

Yet, in spite of the diverse forms that human bondage and coercion have taken over time, academic debates in the modern West and beyond have largely focused on slavery, and in particular, the Greco-Roman and the transatlantic varieties of slavery. Meanwhile, slavery and other dependency relations in the Arab world, Asia, pre-Columbian America, and even in some parts of Europe have received comparatively meagre attention. Furthermore, these prototypes, i.e., the Greek, Roman, and transatlantic slaveries, continue to inform our understanding of slavery across contexts. Thus, preconceptions confine our view on slavery to phenomena that share certain markers, such as the legally unfree status of enslaved persons, the assumption that slaves are not paid for work, cannot own property, and that they remain completely at the mercy of a master or mistress.<sup>5</sup> Contemporary perspectives on freedom are also ideologically charged in that they project the post-Enlightenment Western ideal of personal autonomy onto historical and cultural contexts to which the idea of freedom in the sense of ‘personal choices and possibilities’ is completely alien. In contrast to these assumptions, Alice Rio has recently argued, for example, that in late antiquity and the early medieval period, a person’s legal freedom was not an ideal state of being but rather a bargaining tool. Voluntarily giving up

4 Miller, Joseph C., *The Problem of Slavery as History: A Global Approach* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 2.

5 Testart, Alain, *L’esclave, la dette et le pouvoir: études de sociologie comparative* (Paris: Errance, 2002).

one's freedom could, therefore, be considered beneficial for various reasons.<sup>6</sup> Relations of asymmetrical dependency that do not share the most obvious traits which inform the traditional view on slavery have either remained outside the scope of slavery studies or have been examined merely as evidence for the decline of the phenomenon, like, e.g., in the debates regarding serfdom or *coloni*.

All of this is not to say the traditional paradigm of slavery vs. freedom does not serve its purpose concerning a range of phenomena. A legal historian researching Roman and Post-Roman laws on slavery would struggle to avoid binary constructions of slavery and freedom because, *legally* speaking, there was indeed a clear-cut distinction between a *servus* and a *liber*. However, this distinction is not necessarily valuable for studies on living conditions, employment, education, and, for that matter, social status within a certain community or society. For instance, Emma Kalb's research on Eunuch slavery illustrates that Hilāl Khān, an elite eunuch at the court of the Mughal emperor Jahāngīr, was certainly unfree in legal terms as we can infer of him being referred to as a "gold-bought slave."<sup>7</sup> Yet, he was considered an intimate of the emperor and, as such, was able to build for himself a grand house with his own financial means. He also moved within the elite circles of the empire, even though members of the elite may not have viewed him as one of their own. Similarly, Ulrike Roth's survey of the donation and will of Vincent of Huesca shows that slaves could indeed own property in the form of land and other *servi*.<sup>8</sup> She also argues that the possession of exploitable land and workforce is much more likely to indicate the grade of dependency of an individual than their legal status. Sinah Kloß' investigation of Indian indentured labour in the Caribbean and Christian Mader's study of social stratification in the Pre-Columbian Andes of Southern Peru, in contrast, reveal how nominally free people like peasants and workers were radically confined to a specific area and certain occupations.<sup>9</sup>

6 Rio, Alice, "Self-sale and Voluntary Entry into Unfreedom, 300–1100," *Journal of Social History* 45, (3) (2012): 661–685.

7 Kalb, Emma, *Slaves at the Center of Power: Eunuchs in the Service of the Mughal Elite, 1556–1707* (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 2020), 244–251.

8 Roth, Ulrike, "Slavery and the Church in Visigothic Spain: The Donation and Will of Vincent of Huesca," *Antiquité Tardive* 24 (2016): 433–452.

9 Kloß, Sinah, "Embodying Dependency: Caribbean Godna (Tattoos) as Female Subordination and Resistance," *The Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Anthropology* 27 (2022): 1–12; see also Tinker, Hugh, *A New System of Slavery: The Export of Indian Labour Overseas 1830–1920*, 2nd ed. (London: Hansib Publications, 1993); Mader, Christian, *Sea Shells in the Mountains and Llamas on the Coast: The Economy of the Paracas Culture (800 to 200 BC) in Southern Peru* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2019); idem, Markus Reindel, and Johny Isla,

The established political, social, and economic surroundings guaranteed that the dependent individuals had virtually no prospect of exiting or significantly changing their respective relations of dependency.

There is, of course, an acute awareness within slavery studies as to the shortcomings of the binary opposition of slavery and freedom. Consequently, for more than forty years, researchers have highlighted the divergent forms taken by slavery in various contexts and have attempted to define the phenomenon beyond the scope of legal notions and other traditional markers. The most well-known attempt is certainly Orlando Patterson's description of slavery as "social death." More recent proposals arise from, e.g., David Pelteret, Alice Rio, and Youval Rotman.<sup>10</sup> In recent scholarship, one can also observe a trend to subsume all manifestations of slavery and dependency under the umbrella concept of slavery—in conscious acceptance of the ensuing limitations and problems.<sup>11</sup> In practice, however, researchers struggle to utilize the dichotomy of slavery and freedom to adequately describe or analyze the phenomena they observe. For, if one employs this dichotomous paradigm in its traditional, narrow sense, it merely serves to determine whether or not a phenomenon can be called slavery. If one conceptualizes the prevailing model in the widest possible way, i.e., as a spectrum between the two poles of "slavery" and "free labour,"<sup>12</sup> a crucial problem persists: The implicit *tertium comparationis* to all observed phenomena remains the ideally charged concept of slavery which—as we have already stated—principally invokes the notion of Atlantic or Greco-Roman chattel slavery. In short, the dichotomy of slavery and freedom cannot account for the complexity of the evidence even within slavery studies, let alone for that of the presumably much wider field of dependency studies.

Therefore, while the call for a new taxonomy emanated from within slavery studies,<sup>13</sup> the obvious consequences which flow from the desired widening of

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"Economic Directness in the Western Andes: A New Model of Socioeconomic Organization for the Paracas Culture in the First Millennium BC," *Latin American Antiquity* 33 (2022): 1–19.

10 Pelteret, David A. Edgell, *Slavery in Early Mediaeval England: From the Reign of Alfred until the Twelfth Century* (Rochester: Boydell, 1995); Rio, Alice, *Slavery After Rome: 500–1100* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017); Rotman, Youval, *Byzantine Slavery and the Mediterranean World* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009).

11 See, e.g., Eltis, David, and Stanley L. Engerman, "Dependence, Servility and Coerced Labor in Time and Space." In *The Cambridge World History of Slavery*. Vol. 3: AD 1420–AD 1804, eds. David Eltis, Stanley L. Engerman, Seymour Drescher, and David Richardson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 1–21.

12 See Eltis and Engerman, "Dependence, Servility and Coerced Labor," 2011, 3.

13 Miers, Suzanne, "Slavery: A Question of Definition, Slavery and Abolition," *Slavery and Abolition: A Journal of Slave and Post-Slave Studies* 24 (2) (2003): 1–16; Quirk, Joel, *The Anti-*

the perspective have yet to be drawn. The continued use of the ideologically charged term slavery as an analytical concept continues to restrict the discourse. In contrast, the analytical concept of asymmetrical dependency allows for the study of a wide range of societal, group-related, and individual varieties of hierarchization and oppression. It encapsulates such varied realities as debt bondage, convict labour, tributary labour, servitude, serfdom, and domestic work, as well as forms of wage labour and various types of patronage. In addition to extending the discourse beyond (Mediterranean and transatlantic chattel) slavery, the application of the intentionally broad concept of asymmetrical dependency also expands the temporal scope and geographic area of inquiry to include pre-modern and non-European societies that have yet to receive significant attention. The thematic, temporal, and spatial extension of analysis through the lens of asymmetrical dependency promises to reinvigorate the international academic debate on slavery and raise new questions about past and present social inequalities and forms of economic exploitation.

However, whereas the concept of slavery has been challenged for being too narrow, the opposite could be said of dependency. Indeed, sociological and psychological theories are conscious of the inevitability of dependency within all human and non-human relations. Yet, advocates for the conceptual shift toward asymmetrical dependency argue that whereas some degree of dependency affects every single being all of the time, *asymmetrical*, i.e., strong or enduring, forms of dependency do not. In order to more clearly define the historical phenomena the concept of asymmetrical dependency seeks to cover, we propose the following main characteristics by way of a preliminary definition:<sup>14</sup>

1. Asymmetrical dependency occurs within relations between two or more actors.<sup>15</sup> The position of an actor can, in principle, be assumed by all entities, i.e., human beings, animals, elements of nature, material artefacts, gods, and spirits.

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*Slavery Project: From the Slave Trade to Human Trafficking*, ed. Bert B. Lockwood (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011); Zeuske, Michael, *Handbuch Geschichte der Sklaverei: Eine Globalgeschichte von Anfängen bis zur Gegenwart* (Boston, MA: DeGruyter, 2013); Mende, Janne, "The Concept of Modern Slavery: Definition, Critique, and the Human Rights Frame," *Human Rights Review* 20 (2) (2019): 229–248.

- 14 A similar version of this definition featured in the unpublished research funding application for the Bonn Cluster of Dependency and Slavery Studies by Stephan Conermann et al.
- 15 See Patterson, Orlando, *Slavery and Social Death. A Comparative Study* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982).

2. Asymmetrical dependency is based on the ability of one actor to control the actions of another actor and/or their access to resources.<sup>16</sup>
3. Asymmetrical dependency is usually supported by an institutional context in such a way as to ensure that the dependent actors cannot simply change their situation by either going away (“exit”) or by articulating impactful protest (“voice”).<sup>17</sup>

### 1.2 *Studying Relations of Asymmetrical Dependency—Current Perspectives from Slavery Studies and Related Fields*

Unsurprisingly, nearly all existing research on relations of asymmetrical dependency can be found within the field of slavery studies. Most contributions within this extensive field come from historians, historically oriented sociologists, and legal scholars. A range of comprehensive, though largely additive, overviews, such as encyclopedias or handbooks<sup>18</sup> offer a long view on the phenomenon of slavery. Some historical surveys are topically organized or treat the subject with a typological and/or a global scope.<sup>19</sup> Other contributions avail themselves of more comparative and theoretical approaches informed by sociology or anthropology.<sup>20</sup> Yet, explicit attempts at theory-building in the field are few and far between.<sup>21</sup> The bulk of the existing research consists of empirical

16 See Coleman, James S., *Foundations of Social Theory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990).

17 See Hirschman, Albert O., *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty: Responses to Decline in Firms, Organizations, and States* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970).

18 For example, Eltis, David and Stanley L. Engerman, eds., *The Cambridge World History of Slavery* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011–2021); Zeuske, Michael, *Sklaverei: Eine Menschheitsgeschichte von der Steinzeit bis heute* (Ditzingen: Reclam, 2021).

19 Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*, 1982; Quirk, Joel, “Ending Slavery in all its Forms: Legal Abolition and Effective Emancipation in Historical Perspective,” *The International Journal of Human Rights* 12 (4) (2008): 529–554; Flaig, Egon, *Weltgeschichte der Sklaverei* (München: C.H. Beck, 2009); Miller, *The Problem of Slavery as History*, 2012; Reid, Anthony, *Slavery, Bondage and Dependency in Southeast Asia* (St. Lucia: Univ. of Queensland Pr., 1983); Zeuske, *Sklaverei: Eine Menschheitsgeschichte*, 2021.

20 See most famously Finley, Moses I., *Ancient Slavery and Modern Ideology*, ed. Brent Shaw (New York: The Viking Press, 1980); Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*, 1982; Meillassoux, Claude, *Anthropologie de l’esclavage: Le ventre de fer et d’argent* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1986); Testart, *Lesclave, la dette et le pouvoir*, 2002; Miers, “Slavery: A Question of Definition,” 2008; Davis, David Brion, “Re-Examining the Problem of Slavery in Western Culture,” *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society* 118 (2) (2008): 247–266.

21 Rotman, Youval, “Comparing Slavery: History and Anthropology.” In *Comparative Studies in the Humanities*, ed. Guy Stroumsa (Jerusalem: The Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 2018), 89–102.

case studies. As indicated in the previous section, most of these projects concentrate on the two classical examples of slavery, i.e., forms of slavery in ancient Mediterranean societies, especially in Ancient Greece and Ancient Rome, and transatlantic forms of slavery. Within the research on the latter, one can distinguish the field of abolition studies.<sup>22</sup>

By comparison, alternative forms of dependency in the world's other regions and in different periods are insufficiently documented. Only a few publications on slavery and related phenomena focus on non-European regions. For example, as far as the African continent is concerned, slaveries not operated by Europeans in areas other than Western Africa are severely understudied.<sup>23</sup> However, some studies focus on slavery in Islamic polities between Arabian regions, Northeast Africa, and Western Africa, especially from a legal perspective.<sup>24</sup> The relatively few studies on slavery in Asia exhibit a certain bias towards Southeast Asia and the realm of the Indian Ocean.<sup>25</sup> For the Indian Ocean region, some works emphasize transregional connectedness.<sup>26</sup> More recently, promising research on the legal history of slavery and labour in the Lusophone South Atlantic has been published.<sup>27</sup> Finally, there are several studies on phe-

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- 22 Sinha, Manisha, "Guest Editor's Introduction: The Future of Abolition Studies," *The Journal of the Civil War Era* 8 (2) (2018): 187–189.
- 23 Meillassoux, *Anthropologie de l'esclavage*, 1986.
- 24 Srivastava, Manoj, "Moving Beyond 'Institutions Matter': Some Reflections on How the 'Rules of the Game' Evolve and Change" *LSE Crisis States Discussion Paper 4* (London: Crisis States Development Research Center at the London School of Economics, 2004); Franz, Kurt, "Slavery in Islam: Legal Norms and Social Practices." In *Slavery and the Slave Trade in the Eastern Mediterranean (c. 1000–1500)*, eds. Reuven Amitai and Christoph Cluse (Turnhout: Brepols, 2018), 51–141.
- 25 Reid, *Slavery, Bondage, and Dependency*, 1983; Chevalyere, Claude, "The Abolition of Slavery and the Status of Slaves in Late Imperial China." In *The Palgrave Handbook of Bondage and Human Rights in Africa and Asia*, eds. Alessandro Stanziani and Gwyn Campbell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 57–82.
- 26 Van Rossum, Matthias, Alexander Geelen, Bram van den Hout, and Merve Tosun, *Testimonies of Enslavement: Sources on Slavery from the Indian Ocean World* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020); Chakraborty, Titas, and Matthias van Rossum, "Slave Trade and Slavery in Asia—New Perspective," *Journal of Social History* 54 (1) (2020): 1–14; Nicolaas, Samantha S., Matthias Van Rossum, and Ulbe Bosma, "Towards an Indian Ocean and Maritime Asia Slave Trade Database: An Exploration of Concepts Lessons and Models," *Slaveries and Post-Slaveries* 3 (2020): 1–30.
- 27 Dias Paes, Mariana A., "Shared Atlantic Legal Culture: the Case of a Freedom Suit in Benguela," *Atlantic Studies: Global Currents* 17 (3) (2020), 419–440; Dias Paes, Mariana A. "Ser dependente no Império do Brasil: terra e trabalho em processos judiciais," *Población & Sociedad: Revista de Estudios Sociales* 27 (2) (2020), 8–29.

nomena related to slavery, e.g., serfdom in particular regions of Europe or Eurasia.<sup>28</sup>

Regarding the historiography of slavery, there are few extant studies on commemoration, slavery museums, public displays of slavery, and on “consuming” slavery through tourism, e.g., in festivals or cultural markets.<sup>29</sup> Similarly, contemporary forms of slavery require further investigation, especially from a historical perspective. Some researchers link historical trajectories of slaveries with contemporary issues, such as the role of slavery in the “racialization of the modern world.”<sup>30</sup> Detailed studies on current anti-slavery movements are rare.<sup>31</sup> Other existing studies on contemporary slavery and anti-slavery movements tend to focus on practice, policy, and human rights. While such applied studies are informative, they are rarely of immediate value for historical research. Among the challenges facing research on contemporary forms of slavery is the use of the term slavery itself. In discussions over human rights and social policy, the term is primarily employed to draw attention to severe human rights abuses and to prompt political action. Nevertheless, the juridical aspects of applied studies that use the term slavery as a mechanism for policy change are revealing for historical scholarship in that they propose practical, if broad, working definitions of contemporary slavery.

A range of fresh approaches has pushed the field of slavery studies beyond its historically limited geographic and temporal scope. Several recent studies revisit classical forms of slavery from new perspectives, e.g., informed by insights from migration studies, postcolonialist approaches, or cultural studies.<sup>32</sup> Others approach slavery from a historical anthropological perspective

28 Hoch, Steven L., *Serfdom and Social Control in Nineteenth Century Russia. Petrovskoe, a village in Tambov* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986); Cerman, Markus, “‘Serfdom’ and Slavery in European History since the Middle Ages: Identifying Common Aspects for Future Research. Contribution to the Final Round Table,” In *Schiavitù e servaggio nell’economia Europea, secc. XI–XVIII / Serfdom and Slavery in the European Economy, 11th–18th Centuries*, ed. Simonetta Cavaciocchi (Firenze: Firenze University Press, 2014), 665–676; Stanziani, Alessandro, *Bondage. Labor and Rights in Eurasia from the Sixteenth to the Early Twentieth Centuries* (New York: Berghahn, 2015).

29 Knauer, Lisa Maya, “Consuming Slavery, Performing Cuba: Ethnography, Carnival and Black Public Culture,” *Ethnicity and Race in a Changing World: A Review Journal* 2 (2) (2011): 3–25.

30 Pierre, Jemima, “Slavery, Anthropological Knowledge, and the Racialization of Africans,” *Current Anthropology* 61 (S22) (2020): 220–231, 221.

31 Murphy, Laura T., *The New Slave Narrative: The Battle Over Representations of Contemporary Slavery* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019).

32 Hanß, Stefan and Juliane Schiel, “Semantics, Practices and Transcultural Perspectives on Mediterranean Slavery.” In *Mediterranean Slavery Revisited (500–1800)—Neue Perspek-*

that combines archival and field research.<sup>33</sup> Furthermore, archaeological research on prehistoric forms of slavery is an emerging field.<sup>34</sup> The same can be said about research into the role of material culture for slavery and slave identity in particular.<sup>35</sup>

Beyond the distinct field of slavery studies, there are various projects concerned with forms of asymmetrical dependency, even if they do not employ this term when describing the social relations they observe.<sup>36</sup> Most of the relevant studies belong to the field of labour history. These historical projects explore specific forms and dynamics of labour, human bondage, and coercion, especially from a social-historical, colonial-historical, or postcolonial perspective.<sup>37</sup> Contributions from this field mostly study unfree labour conditions in poor countries and regions and marginalized areas within the global system of unequal exchange, such as in agricultural work, fishery,<sup>38</sup> and human trafficking or sex work.<sup>39</sup>

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*tiven auf mediterrane Sklaverei (500–1800)*, eds. Stefan Hanß and Juliane Schiel (Zürich: Chronos, 2014), 11–24; Rauhut, Claudia, and Manuela Boatcă, “Globale Ungleichheiten in der longue durée: Kolonialismus, Sklaverei und Forderungen nach Wiedergutmachung.” In *Globale Ungleichheit: Über Zusammenhänge von Kolonialismus, Arbeitsverhältnissen und Naturverbrauch*, eds. Karin Fischer and Margarete Grandner (Wien: Mandelbaum Verlag, 2019), 91–110; Rutherford, Danilyn, “Atlantic Slavery and the Making of the Modern World,” *Current Anthropology* 61 (S22) (2020): 141–144; Thiaw, Ibrahima, and Deborah L. Mack, “Atlantic Slavery and the Making of the Modern World: Experiences, Representations, and Legacies. An Introduction to Supplement 22,” *Current Anthropology* 61 (S22) (2020): 145–158.

- 33 Tappe, Oliver and Ulrike Lindner, “Introduction: Global Variants of Bonded Labour.” In *Bonded Labour: Global and Comparative Perspectives (18th–21st Century)*, eds. Sabine Damir-Geilsdorf, Ulrike Lindner, Gesine Müller, Oliver Tappe, and Michael Zeuske (Bielefeld: transcript, 2016), 9–34.
- 34 Marshall, Lydia W., “Introduction: The Comparative Archaeology of Slavery.” In *The Archaeology of Slavery: A Comparative Approach to Captivity and Coercion*, ed. Lydia Wilson Marshall (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2015), 1–23.
- 35 Leone, Mark P., “The Problem: Religion within the World of Slaves,” *Current Anthropology* 61 (S22) (2020): 276–288.
- 36 See, e.g., Piketty, Thomas, *Kapital und Ideologie* (München: C.H. Beck, 2020).
- 37 E.g., Van der Linden, Marcel, *Workers of the World: Essays Toward a Global Labor History* (Leiden: Brill, 2008); Van der Linden, Marcel, and Magaly Rodríguez García, eds., *On Coerced Labor: Work and Compulsion after Chattel Slavery* (Leiden: Brill, 2016).
- 38 Marschke, Melissa and Peter Vandergeest, “Slavery Scandals: Unpacking Labour Challenges and Policy Responses within the Off-Shore Fisheries Sector,” *Marine Policy* 68 (2016): 39–46.
- 39 Lainez Nicolas, “The Contested Legacies of the Anthropology of Debt Bondage in Southeast Asia: Indebtedness in the Vietnamese Sex Sector,” *American Anthropologist* 120 (4) (2018): 671–683.

Building on the insight that “gender is a primary way of signifying relationships of power,”<sup>40</sup> some more recent projects are informed by gender studies and intersectionality approaches.<sup>41</sup>

Research on dependency that does employ the term is scattered across different disciplines: Forms of dependency between humans are studied predominantly by historical sociologists, in development studies, and in globalization research. Mutual dependency and the relatedness of dependency and power are established topics in sociology and the psychology of small groups.<sup>42</sup> One core macro-theoretical endeavour is Dependency Theory<sup>43</sup> within Development Studies and Colonial History along with its offshoots, especially World-System Theory.<sup>44</sup> These macro-theories have been used in micro-research on

40 Scott, Joan W., *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 167.

41 Schmieder, Ulrike, “Forschungsstand und offene Fragen zu Postemanzipation und Gender in Französisch-Westindien,” *Comparativ: Zeitschrift für Globalgeschichte und vergleichende Gesellschaftsforschung* 17 (1) (2007): 79–100; Schmieder, Ulrike, “Interdependencies of Class, Ethnicity and Gender in the Postemancipation Societies of Martinique and Cuba.” In *Interdependencies of Social Categorisations*, eds. Daniela Céleri, Tobias Schwarz, and Bea Wittger (Frankfurt a.M.: Vervuert Verlagsgesellschaft, 2013), 65–89; Schmieder, Ulrike, “Masculine and Feminine Identities of Slaves, Patrocinados and Freedmen in Cuba in the 1880s,” *EnterText: An Interactive Interdisciplinary E-Journal for Cultural and Historical Studies and Creative Work* 12 (2018), Accessed May 6, 2021. <http://www.brunel.ac.uk/creative-writing/research/entertext/issues/>; Campbell, Gwyn, and Elizabeth Elbourne, eds., *Sex, Power, and Slavery* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2014); Sjöholm, Maria, *Gender-Sensitive Norm Interpretation by Regional Human Rights Law Systems* (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 455–505; Østhus, Hanne, “Servants in Rural Norway, ca. 1650–1800.” In *Servants in Rural Europe, ca. 1400–1900*, ed. Jane Whittle (Suffolk: Boydell and Brewer, 2017), 113–130; Østhus, Hanne, “Were All Servants Women? Reflections on the Use of Gender in Research on Domestic Service.” In *Gender, History, Futures, Report from the XI Nordic Women’s and Gender History Conference*, eds. Daniel Nyström and Johanna Overud (Stockholm: SKOGH, 2018), 103–111.

42 E.g., Emerson, Richard M., “Power-Dependence Relations,” *American Sociological Review* 27 (1) (1962): 31–41; Michaels, James W. and James A. Wiggins, “Effects of Mutual Dependency and Dependency Asymmetry on Social Exchange,” *Sociometry: A Journal of Research in Social Psychology* 39 (4) (1976): 368–376; Molm, Linda D., “Relatives Effects of Individual Dependencies: Further Tests of the Relation between Power Imbalance and Power Use,” *Social Forces* 63 (3) (1985): 810–837.

43 Amin, Samir, *Unequal Development: An Essay on the Social Formation of Peripheral Capitalism* (Sussex: Harvester Press, 1976); Cardoso, Fernando H., and Enzo Faletto, *Dependency and Development in Latin America*, trans. Marjory Mattingly Urquidí (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979).

44 Wallerstein, Immanuel Maurice, *The Modern World System II: Mercantilism and the Consolidation of the European World-Economy, 1600–1750* (New York: Academic Press, 1980); Wallerstein, Immanuel Maurice, *World-Systems Analysis: An Introduction* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

dependency relations, e.g., within the economy of health in poor countries.<sup>45</sup> In critical development studies, some researchers have employed methods informed by postcolonial insights to identify dependency in contemporary polities.<sup>46</sup> However, dependencies among indigenous peoples in pre-colonial and colonial periods are still a widely neglected topic.<sup>47</sup> A more recent development is the analysis of precarious employment conditions within research institutions which employs dependency as a paradigm.<sup>48</sup>

In summary, the study of asymmetrical dependencies presents itself as a much-needed augmentation of slavery studies with which it shares several topics of interest. These are, for example, the role of inequality and patron-client-relations,<sup>49</sup> the relevance of kin relations,<sup>50</sup> and the notion of “social death.”<sup>51</sup> Furthermore, both fields maintain a general emphasis on social order, the relevance of shared emic conceptions of power, inequality, labour, and the importance of actors’ views, experiences, and emotions. In order to further develop and refine the intentionally broad concept of asymmetrical dependency and to establish the notion of asymmetrical dependency within the existing fields of research, more theoretical and empirical work needs to be done. At present, more than 130 researchers work on forms of asymmetrical dependency at the Bonn Center of Dependency and Slavery Studies (BCDSS) in Bonn. The topics of these variegated case studies include, to name only a few, forced labour in Early Mesopotamia (Vitali Bartash), embodied depen-

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- 45 Morgan, Lynn M., “Dependency Theory in the Political Economy of Health: An Anthropological Critique,” *Medical Anthropology Quarterly* 1 (2) (1987): 131–154.
- 46 Ferguson, James, “Declarations of Dependence: Labour, Personhood and Welfare in Southern Africa,” *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 19 (2) (2013): 223–242.
- 47 E.g., Ruyle, Eugene E., “Slavery, Surplus, and Stratification on the Northwest Coast: The Ethnoenergetics of an Incipient Stratification System,” *Current Anthropology* 14 (5) (1973): 603–631; Wengrow, David, and David Graeber, “Many Seasons Ago: Slavery and Its Rejection among Roagers on the Pacific Coast of North America,” *American Anthropologist* 120 (2) (2018): 237–249; Graeber, David and David Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2021).
- 48 See, e.g., Peacock, Vita, “Academic Precarity as Hierarchical Dependence in the Max Planck Society,” *HAV: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 6 (1) (2016.): 95–119.
- 49 Scott, James C., “Patron-Client Politics and Political Change in Southeast Asia,” *American Political Science Review* 66 (1) (1972): 91–113.
- 50 Meillassoux, Claude, *Die wilden Früchte der Frau: Über häusliche Produktion und kapitalistische Wirtschaft* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1983); Kopytoff, Igor, “Slavery,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 11 (1982): 207–230.
- 51 Králová, Jana “What is Social Death?,” *Journal of the Academy of Social Sciences* 10 (3) (2015): 235–248; Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death* 1982; Patterson, Orlando, “Revisiting Slavery, Property, and Social Death.” In *On Human Bondage. After Slavery and Social Death*, eds. John Bodell and Walter Scheidel (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2017), 265–296.

dencies in Indo-Caribbean communities (Sinah Kloß), household hierarchies in the colonial Mosquito Shore (Dita Auzina), and prisoners of war in Siberia and North Asia (Lisa Hellmann). Several projects within the BCDSS are also shedding light on the benefits of intersectional approaches that place the concept of asymmetrical dependency in conversation with theories of hegemonic gender construction (e.g., David B. Smith and Malik Ade). The results of these case studies will naturally transform the present understanding of asymmetrical dependency.

Regarding theory development, thus far, no comprehensive theories of institutions or relations of asymmetrical dependency have been brought forward. However, at present, researchers are exploring two theoretical avenues. The first uses sociological theory to develop a general notion of dependency in human social relations. This perspective is linked to macro-sociological theorizing and inquires into the role of “pervasive asymmetrical dependencies” on a societal level.<sup>52</sup> The second theoretical approach builds on insights from cultural studies and micro-history to define dependency.<sup>53</sup> It facilitates a “history of relations”<sup>54</sup> and emphasizes “the centrality of historical agents, their practices and their strategies.”<sup>55</sup> Stefan Hanß and Juliane Schiel have employed a micro-historical approach to the history of slavery. They have attempted to develop a praxeological understanding of dependency that focuses on concrete “practices,” “life spheres,” and “social relationships.”<sup>56</sup> Their work also examines the concrete “scopes of action” of the actors involved. While not aligning ourselves with all its theoretical foundations, it is this second approach to which we most closely adhere in what follows.

52 Stichweh, Rudolf, “How Do Divided Societies Come About? Persistent Inequalities, Pervasive Asymmetrical Dependencies, and Sociocultural Polarization as Divisive Forces in Contemporary Society,” *Global Perspectives* 2 (1) (2021).

53 See, e.g., De Vito, Christian G., Juliane Schiel, and Matthias van Rossum, “From Bondage to Precariousness? New Perspectives on Labor and Social History,” *Journal of Social History* 54 (2020): 644–662.

54 Epple, Angelika, “Globale Mikrogeschichte: Auf dem Weg zu einer Geschichte der Relationen.” In *Im Kleinen das Große suchen: Mikrogeschichte in Theorie und Praxis*, eds. Ewald Hiebl and Ernst Langthaler (Innsbruck: Studienverlag, 2012), 37–47, quoted according to De Vito, Christian G., “History Without Scale: The Micro-Spatial Perspective,” *Past and Present: A Journal of Historical Studies* 242 (S14) (2019): 351.

55 De Vito, “History Without Scale,” 2019, 349.

56 Hanß, Stefan and Juliane Schiel, “Semantics, Practices and Transcultural Perspectives on Mediterranean Slavery.” In *Mediterranean Slavery Revisited (500–1800)—Neue Perspektiven auf mediterrane Sklaverei (500–1800)*, eds. Stefan Hanß and Juliane Schiel (Zürich: Chronos, 2014), 18.

## 2 A Practice-Oriented Approach to Social Relations of Asymmetrical Dependency

As indicated above, we understand asymmetrical dependencies as dynamic relational processes between two or more actors. Social relations of asymmetrical dependency are usually facilitated or supported by an institutional background, i.e., a social order which allows certain actors (A) to control the actions and/or the access to the resources<sup>57</sup> of other actors (B).

In order to explore how exactly any given Actor A may shape and maintain the social relationship of asymmetrical dependency “in practice” and to understand Actor B’s role within this relationship, we employ current approaches of practice theory and new materialism as well as the more classical approaches of critical theory. Bringing these different concepts together helps us conceive of asymmetrical dependency as a dynamic and interactive but still socially structured process between human actors while also considering the impact of non-human entities. Moreover, it allows us to understand how specific relations of asymmetrical dependency are linked to broader and translocal networks and their inherent power relations.

In what follows, we take up the suggestions of the micro-historical approach mentioned above and adopt different theoretical concepts, some of which have been attributed to the so-called “ontological turn” in social and cultural theory,<sup>58</sup> while others belong to an older strand of neo-Marxist critical theory. Even though these different theories are often perceived as incompatible or even antagonistic (perhaps especially by protagonists of the ontological turn), our impression is that fully developed theoretical stringency and coherence might not be the most important concern at this point in the discussion. For now, we are still trying to understand how social relations of asymmetrical dependency emerge, how they are sustained in specific social settings, how the actors

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57 Resources in the sense of economic, cultural, and social capital may be, firstly, financial means or various kinds of property (economic capital), such as farmland or working equipment; secondly, different types of knowledge such as education (cultural capital), e.g. the ability to read and write or crafting skills. Thirdly, resources may be valuable and influential social relationships to other actors and networks (social capital), e.g. relationships with prestigious or wealthy members of a local community who can advocate on behalf of Actor B, or certain alliances of actors who are in a similar position and who join forces to contest local social orders of asymmetrical dependency. See Bourdieu, Pierre. “The Forms of Capital.” In *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, ed. John G. Richardson (New York: Greenwood, 1986), 241–258.

58 Hoolbraad, Martin and Morten Axel Pedersen, *The Ontological Turn: An Anthropological Exposition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

involved shape these relations in practical ways, and how their actions develop as social practices. In this endeavour, practice theory and new materialism may help us define ‘practice’ more precisely, reconsider the nexus of structure and agency, and give us new ideas about how to understand the relevance of the ‘material’ of the social settings examined. Critical theory, on the other hand, reminds us that it remains necessary to account for the way in which cultural phenomena of asymmetrical dependency relate to broader political and economic processes and structures, and how they are shaped by power relations.

### 2.1 *Sayings, Doings, and Interagency*

Let us begin this section with a brief definition of practice: Referring loosely to the definition by Andreas Reckwitz and Theodore R. Schatzki, a practice is a “temporally unfolding and spatially dispersed nexus of doings and sayings.”<sup>59</sup> Practices can be understood as socially shared bundles of physical and mental actions carried out by at least one human actor interconnected with several elements such as technology, material artefacts, or organisms. Practices can be structured in terms of routines, i.e., the embodiment of practical understanding and knowing (e.g., riding a bike or crafts); by socially shared and more or less explicit rules and knowledge about how to act in specific social situations; or by what Schatzki has called “teleoaffective structures,”<sup>60</sup> i.e., individual ends and motives and also emotions connected to certain bundles of activities, artefacts, organisms, and meanings.<sup>61</sup>

#### 2.1.1 Sayings

As micro-elements of social practices, *sayings*<sup>62</sup> are linked to what is sometimes referred to as “worldviews” or, more precisely, worldviews-in-action, i.e., written or spoken worldviews. Most sources that help us understand past

59 Reckwitz, Andreas, “Toward a Theory of Social Practices: A Development in Culturalist Theorizing,” *European Journal of Social Theory* 5 (2) (2002): 243–263; Schatzki, Theodore R., *Social Practices. A Wittgensteinian Approach to Human Activity and the Social* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 89.

60 Schatzki, Theodore R., *The Site of the Social: A Philosophical Account of the Constitution of Social Life and Change* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002), 80.

61 Schäfer, Hilmar, “Praxistheorie als Kulturosoziologie.” In *Handbuch Kulturosoziologie*, eds. Stephan Moebius, Frithjof Nungesser, and Katharina Scherke (Wiesbaden: Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2019), 109–130; Everts, Jonathan, “Praktiken und gesellschaftlicher Wandel.” In *Handbuch Praktiken und Raum. Humangeographie nach dem Practice Turn*, eds. Susanne Schäfer and Jonathan Everts (Bielefeld: transcript, 2019), 161–183.

62 For a more elaborate discussion of the concept of “sayings” see Schatzki, “Sayings, Texts, and Discursive Formations,” 2017.

forms of asymmetrical dependency draw on *sayings*, i.e., all kinds of symbolic-discursive expressions and socially regulated productions of cultural representations, such as sculptures, images, or texts. Sayings generally perform three functions in societies. Firstly, sayings draw on and actualize discursive value concepts and orders of knowledge that invisibly shape social relations of asymmetrical dependency. They are articulated and appear as normal and self-evident (e.g., common-sense knowledge, sensory experiences, or everyday classifications of the social world) and, hence, are more difficult to reflect upon. Following Louis Althusser,<sup>63</sup> such orders of knowledge can be conceived in terms of an 'ideology' that structures people's imaginations and their lived experiences. This is the case, for example, when from the perspective of either those who benefit from or (in some cases) those who are oppressed by the political systems and economic structures connected to it, social relations of asymmetrical dependency appear to be self-evident, the results of an alleged 'natural order.' However, sayings articulating such orders of knowledge are not to be understood in terms of a 'false consciousness.' They rather materialize in practices and institutions. Secondly, sayings can be part of more explicit articulations of worldviews, be it in written or oral form, e.g., programmatic and ideological statements on the moral legitimacy of asymmetrical dependency and associated value concepts. Thirdly, sayings can be part of articulated worldviews that draw on historical or spiritual narratives or visions of the future, e.g., etiologies or religious imaginations of heaven and hell.

It is also important to distinguish between sayings that articulate orthodox worldviews which actualize and reproduce dominant orders of knowledge that normalize social relations of asymmetrical dependency, and those that articulate heterodox worldviews that contest and challenge dominant orders of knowledge. The latter might be sayings produced by abolitionist groups or by certain ethnic or religious minority groups. The societal and religious norms of the Moravians, for example, subverted those of the surrounding societies in many ways.<sup>64</sup> Within the group, however, the heterodox worldviews they expressed would have been considered the norm/orthodox.

For the concrete and practical shaping of a certain social relationship of asymmetrical dependency, it might be important to understand how Actor B

63 Althusser, Louis, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses." In *Lenin and Philosophy and other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (London: New Left Books, 1971), 121–176.

64 See Köstlbauer, Josef, "Ambiguous Passages: Non-Europeans Brought to Europe by the Moravian Brethren During the 18th Century." In *Globalized Peripheries: Central and Eastern Europe's Atlantic Histories, c. 1680–1860*, eds. Klaus Weber and Jutta Wimpler (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2019), 214–236.

relates to dominant orders of knowledge that suggest a normalizing view of certain phenomena of the social and material world. Actor B may adopt such worldviews themselves. Dominant worldviews might appear to them as natural and self-evident, commonsensical perspectives on the social world. In such cases, drawing on what Bourdieu calls “symbolic violence,”<sup>65</sup> Actor B would actively and practically contribute to the reproduction of the social relationship of asymmetrical dependency and the associated order of knowledge that legitimizes it. In addition, Actor B might also have a conscious interest in maintaining the relationship, as it may provide them with more social and physical security compared to other social positions or even generate long-term prospects of emancipation.<sup>66</sup> On the other hand, Actor B may (individually or collectively) develop a heterodox view from their more reflected and distanced position towards orders of knowledge that legitimize their asymmetrical dependency, which may lead them to (individually or collectively) develop resistance against the constraints in which they find themselves.<sup>67</sup> Furthermore, we should not assume that there is ever just one order of knowledge at work at any given time. Instead, we should expect multifaceted emic worldviews in action at the same time, which both legitimise and contest social relations of asymmetrical dependency. Consequently, we must also expect to find complex processes of cultural translation and negotiation, which, especially in the context of postcolonial theories, have been understood and defined in terms of “creolization”<sup>68</sup> or “hybridization.”<sup>69</sup> Simply put, in the processes that shape social relationships, we find creative forms of recombining and mixing different elements into new cultural codes. At the same time, we need to consider how subaltern knowledge, e.g., in the sense of alternative epistemologies of indigenous groups who are forced into social relations of asymmetrical dependency, relates to knowledge orders that legitimize the dominant position of Actor A.

65 Bourdieu, Pierre, *Practical Reason. On the Theory of Action* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994).

66 See Rossi, Benedetta, “From Slavery? Rethinking Slave Descent as an Analytical Category: The Case of the Mauritanian and Moroccan *Haratin*,” *L'Ouest Saharien* 10–11 (2020): 187–208.

67 See, e.g., Wimpler in BCDSS (Bonn Center for Dependency and Slavery Studies), “Interview: A Window on Our Research Perspectives (Lisa Hellmann, Sinah Kloß, Christian Mader, Jutta Wimpler, and Julia Winnebeck),” *DEPENDENT. The Magazine of the Bonn Center for Dependency and Slavery Studies* 21 (1) (January 2021): 16–17, 20.

68 Brathwaite, Edward Kamau, “Creolization in Jamaica.” In *The Post-colonial Studies Reader*, eds. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin (London: Routledge, 1995), 202–205.

69 Bhabha, Homi K., *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994).

Whenever Actor A assumes a position of power that allows them to practically shape and maintain a social relationship of asymmetrical dependency, their activities are tied to practices (including sayings) which are socially regulated in terms of self- and other-categorization (e.g., caste, religion, gender, or ethnicity). This is also the case when Actor B is coerced into the position of a dependent who has both limited power to shape or interpret the relationship and restricted access to resources. Such social categorizations may be articulated via specific terms, e.g., ‘slave’ or ‘servant,’ and/or they may be expressed by body markings, such as tattoos, brandings, earrings, shaved heads, or certain types of clothing. These categories can also be indicated by specific behaviours, including gestures like touching or the lack thereof.<sup>70</sup> Thus, sayings can be included in the process of self-and/or other-categorization and identification. For this reason, we follow De Vito’s advice to consider how social relations of asymmetrical dependency draw on “markers of social differentiation.”<sup>71</sup> He refers to Kimberlé Crenshaw’s concept of intersectionality that calls for examining “the way power has clustered around certain categories and is exercised against others,”<sup>72</sup> which is important for exploring “how multilateral processes of categorization are connected with processes of subordination.”<sup>73</sup> Furthermore, we need to consider how these practices of self- and other-categorization and the use of markers of differentiation draw on, relate to, and thus articulate particular discursive orders of knowledge.

Focusing on worldviews from the perspective of their practical articulation also means that certain terms (such as ‘slave’ or ‘servant’), narratives, and ideologies, should be conceived of as emic “concepts in action.”<sup>74</sup> As such, they do not simply express and represent the material world but are performatively

70 Kloß, Sinah, “Touching Deities: Offerings, Energies, and the Notion of Touch in Guyanese Hinduism.” In *Religion and Touch*, eds. C. Welch and A. Whitehead (Sheffield: Equinox Publishing, 2021): 51–66; Kloß in BCDSS, “Interview: A Window on Our Research Perspectives,” 2021, 16.

71 De Vito, Christian G, “Five Hypotheses on Dependency,” Unpublished Manuscript. PDF file (Bonn Center for Dependency and Slavery Studies, University of Bonn, n.d.), 9; see Hirschauer, Stefan, “Un/doing Differences. Die Kontingenz sozialer Zugehörigkeiten,” *Zeitschrift für Soziologie* 43 (3) (2014): 170–191.

72 Crenshaw, Kimberlé, “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color,” *Stanford Law Review* 43 (6) (1991): 1297.

73 De Vito, “History Without Scale,” 2019, 363.

74 Schiel, Julianne, “The Ragusan ‘Maids-of-all-Work’ Shifting Labor Relations in the Late Medieval Adriatic Sea Region,” *Journal of Global Slavery* 5 (2) (2020): 162; Graf, Paul, “Essential Resources as Bodies of Dependency in Classic Maya Society,” *DEPENDENT. The Magazine of the Bonn Center for Dependency and Slavery Studies* 21 (1) (January 2021), 11.

involved in the practical shaping of social relationships of asymmetrical dependency, and their meaning relies heavily on the context of their use.

### 2.1.2 Doings

*Doings* can be part of practices in terms of conscious and intentional physical actions. An example might be a publicly celebrated act of physical punishment of Actor B by Actor A in front of an audience of other dependents. During this act, Actor A would be fully aware of their actions and consciously follow certain rules and scripts in order to demonstrate their (Actor A's) power and thereby maintain the social order of asymmetrical dependency. Doings on the part of Actor B may be, for example, certain gestures of submission required and performed in official ceremonies (e.g., in rituals of penance). Conversely, doings may consist of acts of resistance by which Actor B objects to their submission. As practices that are put on public display, doings confirm the social order that defines and legitimates the social relation of asymmetrical dependency and the positions of power which define it.

Secondly, doings can be part of practices in terms of less conscious or intentionally employed, routinized physical actions, such as habitualised micro-gestures of appreciation and affection, routinized and embodied skills like walking or crafting, or even skills of effective punishment (e.g., flogging) and subtle reward. Such practices can be understood as skilful performances. The actors use their bodies to follow specific scripts. Their actions are also shaped by incorporated skills, tacit knowledge of behavioural expectations in different situations of social interaction, or knowledge of the emotional effects of certain actions, e.g., how to provoke anger or evoke empathy and compassion in other actors. These skilful performances can also be understood in terms of Bourdieu's notion of "hexis,"<sup>75</sup> i.e., an embodiment of the relation of asymmetrical dependency that shapes the subordinated actor's posture or the way they speak. Such skilful performances of asymmetrical dependency can either be developed in early socialization into a social relationship of asymmetrical dependency or through repeated and forced "dressage" to a point where one can speak of an embodiment or, in Bourdieu's words, a "somatization of the relation of domination."<sup>76</sup>

75 Bourdieu, Pierre, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 87.

76 Bourdieu, Pierre, *Masculine Domination*, trans. Richard Nice (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 56.

### 2.1.3 Interagency

We have to take into account that the social positions of Actors A and B are never perfectly stable, as they always depend on physical, oral, or written actualization and iteration in concrete doings and sayings. This is because every skilful performance that subjugates Actor B depends at least to some extent on Actor B's situational acknowledgement of their asymmetrical dependency, as well as their competence to perform their part of the doing appropriately, e.g., through a socially defined and ritualized gesture of subjection. This always involves the possibility of failure. Similarly, any cultural representation that draws on *sayings*, e.g., a picture that shows a pharaoh slaying an enemy, requires someone to interpret it as an expression of power and social domination, which also involves the possibility of unintentional or deliberate misinterpretation—especially by those meant to be subjugated.

Every social relationship of asymmetrical dependency can potentially be contested and challenged. Social history addresses this possibility with reference to the concept of “agency.”<sup>77</sup> This concept recommends itself for the study of relations of asymmetrical dependency because it allows for an understanding of the phenomenon as a dynamic process between actors that is never a one-way street. However, in light of recent criticism of the notion of agency,<sup>78</sup> we understand the concept not merely in terms of (violent) opposition or resistance but rather as the opportunity to act within relations of asymmetrical dependency.<sup>79</sup> Similarly, the concept of *interagency*<sup>80</sup> emphasizes that indi-

77 See Thompson, Edward Palmer, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1963); Gell, Alfred, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998); Latour, Bruno, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); Haraway, Donna J., *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003); Holzinger, Markus, *Natur als sozialer Akteur: Realismus und Konstruktivismus in der Wissenschafts- und Gesellschaftstheorie* (Opladen: Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2004); see also Frank, Katherine “Agency,” *Anthropological Theory* 6 (3) (2006): 281–302.

78 Johnson, Walter, “On Agency,” *Journal of Social History* 37 (1) (2003): 113–124; Needell, Jeffrey D., “The Abolition of the Brazilian Slave Trade in 1850: Historiography, Slave Agency and States,” *Journal of Latin American Studies* 33 (4) (2001): 681–711.

79 Machado, Maria Helena P.T., “Slavery and Social Movements in Nineteenth-Century Brazil: Slave Strategies and Abolition in São Paulo,” *Review (Fernand Braudel Center)* 34 (1/2) (2011): 163–191; Schwartz, Stuart B., “Denounced by Lévi Strauss CLAH Luncheon Address,” *The Americas: A Quarterly Review of Latin American History* 59 (1) (2002): 1–8.

80 Despret, Vinciane, “From Secret Agents to Interagency,” *History and Theory* 52 (4) (2013): 29–44; Shaw, David Gary, “The Torturer’s Horse: Agency and Animals in History,” *History and Theory* 52 (4) (2013): 146–167; Schiel, Juliane, Isabelle Schürch and Aline Steinbrecher, “Von Sklaven, Pferden und Hunden. Trialog über den Nutzen aktueller Agency-

vidual agency should always be studied in relation to other actors. Therefore, relations of asymmetrical dependency, like any power relation, should neither be understood as unidirectional nor as a characteristic of individuals.<sup>81</sup> Instead, we should conceive both dependency and agency as “fundamentally social”<sup>82</sup> and, thus, analyze them within relations between different actors. Within the framework of asymmetrical dependency, this means that we understand Actors A and B to be situated in a dynamic relation of social interdependency, which is shaped by the actions of both actors and multiple forms of agency (*Handlungsträgerschaft[en]*).<sup>83</sup>

Conceptualising the dynamics within relations of asymmetrical dependency in terms of *interagency* or *interdependency* allows for the observation of various forms of self-empowerment, such as resistance or ambiguous acts of subversive objection or appropriation. It also means that the analytical focus shifts from individual actors to processes of cultural translation (and their moments of productive failure), i.e., to the translation or decoding of knowledge and meaning from one social context into another that takes place ‘in-between,’ as well as to the material conditions that facilitate these translations. Furthermore, as we will argue in the next section, such an approach allows for the extension of the status of ‘actorship’ to a multitude of entities involved in social relations of asymmetrical dependency.

## 2.2 *Thinking Asymmetrical Dependency Beyond Human Actors*

When discussing the concept of ‘interagency,’ we need to address the ontological question of whether the position of an *actor* should be limited to humans or whether organisms such as animals and plants or even entities such as gods and spirits should also be conceived as actors within social relations of asymmetrical dependency.<sup>84</sup> It could be argued that an expansion of the entities that can be considered Actors A and B to include non-human actors would dilute the research focus of the emerging discipline. After all, the primary goal of slavery and dependency studies is to understand asymmetrical dependency as a

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Debatten für die Sozialgeschichte.” In *Neue Beiträge zur Sozialgeschichte*, eds., Caroline Arni, Matthieu Leimgruber, and Simon Teuscher (Zürich: Chronos, 2017), 17–48.

81 Robb, John, “Beyond Agency,” *World Archaeology* 42 (4) (2017): 493–520.

82 Robb, “Beyond Agency,” 499.

83 Schiel, Schürch, and Steinbrecher, “Von Sklaven, Pferden und Hunden,” 2017, 22.

84 With reference to some recent strands of the cognitive science of religion, it might be interesting to think in more detail about how to understand “culturally postulated agents” as actors in relationships of asymmetrical dependency. See Whitehouse, Harvey, *Modes of Religiosity: A Cognitive Theory of Religious Transmission* (Walnut Creek: Alta Mira Press, 2004), 49.

characteristic of *human social order*, i.e., how *people* force other *people* into particular social relations. At the same time, it is important to acknowledge critiques of restricting ‘actorship’ to human beings along with denunciations of the universalisation of Western models of personhood.<sup>85</sup> Moreover, if we take the concept of interagency seriously, we must consider not only how people interact with each other, but also how they engage with non-human entities involved in relationships of asymmetrical dependency. One could, for example, consider whether or not a domesticated horse as a living non-human member of an army has the potential to negotiate its social relationship of asymmetrical dependency to its rider. The horse might, for example, refuse to move due to exhaustion and thereby affect the rider’s scope of action within the horse-rider relationship but also the rider’s relationship with other people, such as his officer, who could punish or demote him for his poor performance. Similarly, one could argue that the assumption that a divine being has instituted a particular social order might both stabilize and restrict A’s power over B. Such a belief might reduce the potential for change. At the same time, a divine order demanding a particular behaviour towards others, as in the case of the ‘golden rule,’ might restrict the scope of violence towards an asymmetrically dependent actor even if societal norms place few limitations upon it. Furthermore, when considering gods, demons, spirits, etc., as actors within relationships of asymmetrical dependency, we might ask to what extent human actors and members of a particular social group claim to hold power or execute control on behalf of these entities. Relationships that include non-human actors then become distinctly comparable to, for example, slave owners who delegate the execution of punishment and the control of the mobility of their dependents to other slaves, servants, or—one might argue—even to walls, fences, iron collars, or chains.

Finally, these questions concern not only epistemological issues but also the ontological status of one of the most important sources through which we seek to understand past social relations of asymmetrical dependency: Namely, *material artefacts* such as the remains of sculptures, pots, tools, weapons, architecture, or even manufactured landscapes such as agricultural terraces.<sup>86</sup> In twentieth-century archaeology and ancient history, such material artefacts were usually examined with regard to their expressive quality, i.e., what they revealed about social relations between people, such as symbolic meanings, social status, everyday practices, or knowledge. The importance of viewing

85 Strathern, Marylin, *The Gender of the Gift. Problems with Women and Problems with Society in Melanesia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).

86 See, e.g., Mader in BCDSS, “Interview: A Window on Our Research Perspectives,” 2021, 16.

material cultures as components of social relations and practices has received more attention from both historians and social scientists since at least the 1980s.<sup>87</sup> Yet, it is only recently, and in the spirit of the ‘New Materialism’<sup>88</sup> within the social sciences that historians have considered the relevance of “material agency,”<sup>89</sup> i.e., how “the capacity to act emerges through participating in relationships with other people and material things.”<sup>90</sup>

Referring to Alfred Gell, John Robb has argued that the researcher’s differentiation between human and non-human actors relies heavily on the epistemological distinction between intentionality and causation.<sup>91</sup> In contrast to this assumption, he claims that “in certain social settings, things both make people do things and are understood culturally as making people do things, much in the same way other people do.”<sup>92</sup> Within social anthropology, Bruno Latour has argued along similar lines. Latour assigns ‘things’ the status of actors within actor-networks, as they are involved in and make a difference to human action.<sup>93</sup> According to Van Oyen, “material objects have an effect on the course of action that is irreducible to direct human intervention.”<sup>94</sup> For example, if a human being (Actor A) coerces another human being (Actor B) to serve them by threatening to kill or maim them with a knife, one should consider Actor A and the knife as a powerful actor network. Said network would consist of both the human being who possesses the capacity to carry a weapon and the weapon itself, which affords Actor A certain kinds of bodily and symbolic agency to act powerfully. In such a situation, Actor A may hurt Actor B or employ the weapon as a symbol to represent a higher social position.

However, despite the danger of Eurocentrism, one might still feel uncomfortable with suspending the epistemological distinction between humans and

87 Appadurai, Arjun, “Introduction: Commodities and the Politics of Value.” In *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 3–63; Miller, Daniel, ed. *Material Cultures: Why Some Things Matter* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

88 Barad, Karen, “Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 28 (3) (2003): 801–83; Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, [2005] 2007; DeLanda, Manuel, *A New Philosophy of Society: Assemblage Theory and Social Complexity* (London: Continuum, 2006); Bennett, Jane, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009).

89 Van Oyen, Astrid, “Material Agency.” In *The Encyclopedia of Archaeological Sciences*, ed. Sandra L. López Varela (Oxford: Wiley, 2018), 1–5.

90 Robb, “Beyond Agency,” 502; Gell, *Art and Agency*, 1998.

91 Robb, “Beyond Agency,” 505.

92 Robb, “Beyond Agency,” 505.

93 Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 2005.

94 Van Oyen, “Material Agency,” 2018, 1.

other entities in the case of social relations of asymmetrical dependency, especially as this field of research focuses on the experiences of people who have been—and continue to be—subjected to enormous suffering by other people. For this reason and in light of the previously sighted epistemological concerns, we suggest maintaining a theoretical distinction between human agency and the way non-human entities are involved in the practical negotiation of social relations of asymmetrical dependency. In doing so, we follow Juliane Schiel, Isabelle Schürch, and Aline Steinbrecher, who understand non-human organisms and material artefacts as “mediators” (*Mittler*) that structure the relationship between human Actors A and B. For example, certificates of release, working equipment whose use requires certain skills and knowledge, clothes that function as markers of a subjugated social position, or instruments used for physical punishment can all function as mediators and thus may be involved in the negotiation or reproduction of asymmetrical dependencies.<sup>95</sup> Similarly, gods and spirits, who in some contexts assume the roles of actors in asymmetrical relationships, could also be understood as mediators because they are not only represented in sermons and prayers, writings, or physical actions such as ritualized performances; they are also frequently depicted and materialized in temples, sculptures, and other artefacts, or regarded as manifest in nature, i.e., in trees or mountains. Scholar of religion Birgit Meyer calls such constellations of media that are “produced, authorized, and authenticated within religious traditions and groups [...] sensational forms” and describes them as the modes “through which a professed transcendent becomes real for those partaking in them.”<sup>96</sup>

All these mediators do not simply express the relationship between Actors A and B; they affect it. Indeed, scholars of asymmetrical dependency have to reckon with the mediators’ “affordances”<sup>97</sup> in the sense that they suggest or call for certain forms of doings and sayings and therefore affect relationships. In considering the affordances of organisms, spirits, gods, and material artefacts within human social relations of asymmetrical dependency, we are convinced that these relations can neither be understood exclusively as the result of con-

95 Schiel, Schürch, and Steinbrecher, “Von Sklaven, Pferden und Hunden,” 2017.

96 Meyer, Birgit, “Religion as Mediation,” *Entangled Religions* 11 (3) (2020). Accessed May 6, 2021. <https://doi.org/10.13154/er.11.2020.8444>. § 7, § 13.

97 Gibson, James J., “The Theory of Affordances.” In *Perceiving, Acting, and Knowing: Toward an Ecological Psychology*, eds. Robert Shaw and John D. Bransford (Hillsdale: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1977), 67–82; Keane, Webb, “Perspectives on Affordances, Or the Anthropologically Real: The 2018 Daryll Forde Lecture,” *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 8(1/2) (2018): 27–38; Norman, Donald A., *The Design of Everyday Things* (New York: Basic Books, 1988).

scious actions and ideas of human actors nor can they be explained solely in terms of economic forces. Instead, the current state of research calls for a recognition of non-human actors, material artefacts, sensational mediators, and other constellations of media as contributors to the formation and preservation of asymmetrical dependencies.

### 2.3 *Asymmetrical Dependency and Social Order—Contexts and Constellations*

So far, we have proposed some theoretical notions that allow us to trace and better understand the different components of social relations of asymmetrical dependency within local settings. We have argued that the study of social relations of asymmetrical dependency needs to consider not only human actors along with their intended and meaningful actions but also the roles of heterogeneous entities such as gods and spirits, non-human organisms, and material artefacts. In doing so, we have espoused an approach to practice theory that focuses on interagency rather than assuming that asymmetrically dependent social relations are unidirectional. However, if we understand relations of asymmetrical dependency as a network of heterogeneous actors, practices, meanings, and material artefacts, we must ascertain to what extent we can conceive of them as “context-specific.”<sup>98</sup> Therefore, we must explore the way in which these relations are situated within broader translocal networks while grappling with the power relations that are inherent within them. For example, we need to address institutionalized political, legal, or economic structures, which maintain and stabilize relations of asymmetrical dependency across time and space, cause their transformation into something different, or even lead to their dissolution.

While we view particular relations of asymmetrical dependency as “context-specific,” we also acknowledge that one can interpret context and contextualization in diverse ways that refer to divergent analytical operations. For example, one could contextualize local social relations of asymmetrical dependency in terms of the background that defines or the framework that surrounds them, such as an economic or a discursive structure. The danger of such an approach to contextualization is that it could result in an analytic procedure that explains a studied and empirically observable phenomenon C (e.g., a locally situated and context-specific saying or doing) through the structuring force of phenomenon D (e.g., a social formation like industrial capitalism or axes of social

98 Hanß and Schiel, “Semantics, Practices and Transcultural Perspectives on Mediterranean Slavery,” 2014, 15.

inequality such as class, race, gender) without being able to show how exactly a social structure is actualized in practice by the different actors' doings and sayings and, thus, how C and D are related. This may also imply presupposing the existence of a structured totality through which, in some invisible way, some or all phenomena are systematically articulated according to and determined by the totality's structuring principle. Along with this comes the danger of overlooking (micro-)situations of deviation from or subversion of dominant social arrangements.

Instead, we suggest a mode of analysis that Christian De Vito, Juliane Schiel, and Matthias van Rossum have termed "radical contextualization."<sup>99</sup> This approach suggests that one must first examine how social relations of asymmetrical dependency emerge at concrete sites and in "specific economic sectors"<sup>100</sup> or other social or political realms. It is only through this concrete, particular methodology that we can effectively describe the complex and sometimes contradictory concurrence of political, economic, and social forces and how the actors themselves perceive them in specific localities. Thus, we argue for an approach to contextualization that examines how the different elements and actors involved in local settings of asymmetrical dependency, i.e., local "bundles" of actions, artefacts, and meanings, actually relate to and resonate with broader, translocal, and more complex "webs of relations and practices"<sup>101</sup> or "constellations."<sup>102</sup> These webs may be legal constellations consisting of legislation, legal documents like contracts, buildings like courthouses that symbolize or embody authority, and institutionalized actors like judges and other representatives of state institutions. A broader economic constellation may generate a wider web connecting the social settings of plantations, farms, markets, or marketplaces to currencies as well as specific (labour) practices and social rela-

99 De Vito, Schiel, and van Rossum, "From Bondage to Precariousness?," 2020, 649.

100 De Vito, Schiel, and van Rossum, "From Bondage to Precariousness?," 2020, 649.

101 Marston, Sallie A., John P. Jones, and Keith Woodward, "Human Geography Without Scale," *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 30 (4) (2005): 419.

102 Schatzki, "Practice Theory as Flat Ontology," 2016. It would be interesting to discuss how the praxeological notion of "constellation" relates to the neo-Marxist concept of "social formation" (Althusser, Louis, and Etienne Balibar. *Reading Capital* [London: New Left Books, 1970]), defined as the "totality of instances articulated on the basis of a determinate mode of production," especially as some members of the BCDSS use the term "social formation" in a rather similar way (De Vito, Schiel, and van Rossum, "From Bondage to Precariousness?," 2020). We would then also need to discuss if and how the neo-Marxist (and rather structuralist) related concept of "totality" can still be useful as a tool within an analytical approach to asymmetrical dependency that seeks to understand the complex relations between economic, political, social, and cultural dynamics.

tions such as labour or trade relations that define products, organisms (e.g., natural resources), and people as means of production, resources, or commodities.

Building upon the approach of Anna Tsing, one could, for example, follow commodity chains of asymmetrical dependency and examine how different socialities of asymmetrical dependency emerge or become involved in the diverse local settings linked by these chains.<sup>103</sup> These chains could be interpreted as different kinds of longer-lasting social relations between a variety of actors that are related to each other via kinship bonds, processes, and sites of economic production, or religious and ethnic communities. One could then explore if and how the social status of asymmetrically dependent actors, their scope of action, and the social categorizations and understandings attributed to them change when they are translated into different social, cultural, economic, and political contexts. In the same vein, one could also ask whether their embeddedness in larger legal or economic constellations and, thus, their connectedness to various local social relations of asymmetrical dependency in disparate sites appears to favour or impede collective resistance, i.e., the likelihood of dependents contesting social relations of asymmetrical dependency and the orders of knowledge that legitimize and naturalize them.

Generally, the concurrence of different social relations connected within these constellations causes and ensures the inability of asymmetrically dependent actors to simply suspend the social relation of asymmetrical dependency and walk away. However, it is important to emphasize that the individual local settings are never fully determined by the greater constellations. In this sense, Doreen Massey has argued that:

‘places’ are criss-crossings in the wider power-geometries which constitute both themselves and ‘the global.’ In this view local places are not simply always the victims of the global; nor are they always politically defensible redoubts *against* the global. For places are also the moments through which the global is constituted, invented, coordinated, produced. They are ‘agents’ *in* globalization.<sup>104</sup>

Local social relations of asymmetrical dependency, therefore, actualize and stabilize broader social orders of the same by being performed at multiple sites by numerous actors simultaneously and by being reproduced continuously over time.

<sup>103</sup> Tsing, Anna Lowenhaupt, *The Mushroom, at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).

<sup>104</sup> Massey, Doreen, “Geographies of Responsibility,” *Geografiska Annaler: Series B, Human Geography* 86 (1) (2014): 11, emphasis in original.

If they are to be guided by the aforementioned theoretical understanding of social relations and constellations of asymmetrical dependency, both historical explorations and research into contemporary expressions of the phenomenon must demonstrate an awareness of both its local and translocal dimensions. In order to adequately understand and analyze social structures of asymmetrical dependency, scholars across various disciplines need to study both: how said relations form and materialize in local contexts and how they are connected to broader constellations or webs of asymmetrical dependency described as “the complex of concrete political, economic, and ideological relations.”<sup>105</sup>

### 3 Asymmetrical Dependency and Comparison—Theoretical and Methodological Considerations

The praxeological approach we propose in this paper aims at identifying local forms of asymmetrical dependency, which are, as we argued above, embedded in complex translocal and more permanent constellations or webs of asymmetrical dependency. Questions about how the local and the global are connected within these constellations, and how different local constellations can be related to one another, point to the challenge of comparison. At the same time, the attempt to overcome the binary opposition of slavery and freedom requires us to think about comparison. Moving away from ‘slavery’ as the central analytical and comparative concept for relations of asymmetrical dependency is part of a wider attempt to avoid existing ‘nostro-centrism,’ that is, merely projecting findings about well-known (often Western) examples onto comparable phenomena in other social orders. This raises the question, however, how to analyze and compare the findings of individual projects if ‘slavery’ is no longer to be used as *tertium comparationis*. Nevertheless, the study of asymmetrical dependency remains a comparative endeavour. For the success of this analytical concept rests at least partly on its suitability to facilitate diachronic and transcultural juxtapositions between existing and future case studies of dependency relations.

Because of this inherently comparative character of the concept of asymmetrical dependency, researchers should be aware of the theoretical and methodological challenges of comparison. To that end, the next section addresses recent prominent critiques of the comparative endeavour with a focus on the challenges associated with historicizing and provincializing points of compar-

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105 De Vito, Schiel, and van Rossum, “From Bondage to Precariousness?,” 2020, 648.

ison (3.1). Afterwards, we will present three recent theoretical approaches to comparison that seem fruitful to the study of asymmetrical dependency (3.2). These are Christian De Vito's and Anne Gerritsen's idea of entangled micro-histories, Oliver Freiberger's reflections on modes, scales, scopes, and the five operations of comparison, and Egil Asprem's fourfold typology. Subsequently, we will position these abstract considerations within the specific context of dependency studies (3.3). We will not propose a single, universally applicable model of comparison. Rather, we will offer some starting points that might allow scholars to reflect on and construct their own comparative methodologies.

### 3.1 *Recent Theoretical Approaches to and Critiques of Comparison*

#### 3.1.1 Comparison as a Basic Operation of Social Life and Culturally Situated Practice

Comparative approaches are often divided into *synchronic* (cross-societal or cross-cultural) comparisons and *diachronic* comparisons (historical, e.g., transepochal). In recent years, comparison has been viewed not merely as a particular research methodology but as a “basic operation of social life.”<sup>106</sup> Attention has been drawn to the central relevance of comparative practices for many areas of society, especially when publicly communicated.<sup>107</sup> This emerging “sociology of comparison” suggests an understanding of comparison as a complex practice of ordering that guarantees the “differentness of the same” through a triple structure of “categorical harmonization, observation of difference, and relationization.”<sup>108</sup> It also draws attention to the fact that while scientific comparisons have had a particular modern history,<sup>109</sup> they are embedded in a long history of everyday practices of comparison from which they can never fully be separated. As a second-order construction, the research methodology of comparison is confronted with a world that is always already engaged in manifold processes of comparison.<sup>110</sup> Treating comparison as a complex and “culturally situated practice”<sup>111</sup> also highlights its similarities to and differences

106 Heintz, Bettina, “‘Wir leben im Zeitalter der Vergleichung.’ Perspektiven einer Soziologie des Vergleichs,” *Zeitschrift für Soziologie* 45 (5) (2016): 306.

107 Heintz, “‘Wir leben im Zeitalter der Vergleichung.’” 2016, 305, 308.

108 Heintz, “‘Wir leben im Zeitalter der Vergleichung.’” 2016, 307–308.

109 Heintz, Bettina, “Kategorisieren, Vergleichen, Bewerten und Quantifizieren im Spiegel sozialer Beobachtungsformate,” *Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie* 73 (Supplement 1) (2021): 15.

110 Heintz, “Kategorisieren, Vergleichen, Bewerten und Quantifizieren,” 2021, 11–21.

111 Rohland, Eleonora and Kirsten Kramer, “Introduction: On ‘Doing Comparison’—Practices of Comparing.” In *Contact, Conquest and Colonization: How Practices of Comparing Shaped*

from other techniques of ordering, for example, making lists and using analogies<sup>112</sup> or practices of classification, evaluation, and quantification.<sup>113</sup> It equally stresses the roles of these techniques in the context of “modern formats of observation,” like statistics, market research, and digital technologies such as social networks or recommender systems.<sup>114</sup>

### 3.1.2 Current Critical Perspectives on Comparison

#### 3.1.2.1 *Postcolonial Critiques of Comparison*

Understanding comparison as a culturally situated practice also allows for the recognition of the long history of comparison as “an instrument of power and dominance throughout [the] European expansion,”<sup>115</sup> during which different “modes of comparing” developed in various “communities of (comparative) practice,” each with their respective audiences.<sup>116</sup> In this view, comparison is perceived as an “activity that helps to (re-) order the world, and hence may set into motion dynamic societal and epistemological changes” and, therefore, appears as a “powerful tool of colonialism.” At the same time, comparison can also function as an “instrument of empowerment” by way of “broadening cultural and societal horizons.”<sup>117</sup>

Most postcolonial perspectives that deal with comparison, however, primarily stress its colonial legacies. In this sense, comparison has come under fire from various angles.<sup>118</sup> In particular, it has been criticised as a practice that erases difference, and which should thus be considered chiefly as an instrument of domination.<sup>119</sup> Instead of understanding comparison as a way to generate new insights, these critiques view it as a Eurocentric practice that imposes

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*Empires and Colonialism Around the World*, eds. Eleonora Rohland, Angelika Epple, Antje Flüchter, and Kirsten Kramer (New York: Routledge, 2021), 4.

112 Heintz, “Wir leben im Zeitalter der Vergleichung,” 2016, 319.

113 Heintz, “Kategorisieren, Vergleichen, Bewerten und Quantifizieren,” 2021.

114 Heintz, Bettina, “Big Observation—Ein Vergleich moderner Beobachtungsformate am Beispiel von amtlicher Statistik und Recommendersystemen,” *Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie* 73 (Supplement 1) (2021): 137–167.

115 Rohland and Kramer, “Introduction,” 2021, 4.

116 Epple, Angelika and Antje Flüchter, “Concluding Observations: Modes of Comparing and Communities of Practice.” In *Contact, Conquest and Colonization: How Practices of Comparing Shaped Empires and Colonialism Around the World*, eds. Eleonora Rohland, Angelika Epple, Antje Flüchter, and Kirsten Kramer (New York: Routledge, 2021), 333–335.

117 Epple and Flüchter, “Concluding Observations,” 2021, 332, 337.

118 Steinmetz, Willibald, “Introduction. Concepts and Practices of Comparison in Modern History.” In *The Force of Comparison: A New Perspective on Modern European History and the Contemporary World*, ed. Willibald Steinmetz (New York: Berghahn, 2019), 5–8.

119 Steinmetz, “Introduction,” 2019, 3–4.

Western ideological categories onto other cultures and is, therefore, deeply entangled with economic exploitation and colonial rule.<sup>120</sup>

The focus on insuperable difference proposed by some radical postcolonial critics has even more serious implications for the endeavour of comparison. These critics maintain that “any practitioner of (nontrivial) comparison is inevitably bound to construct the compared units as well as the categories needed to make the units comparable by drawing on the conceptual apparatus of one particular language.”<sup>121</sup> From this perspective, it is the very attempt to create cross-cultural categories for comparison that makes the whole endeavour a “dubious enterprise.”<sup>122</sup> The historical dominance of Western epistemic regimes and the role comparison plays in them is merely one of the method’s several problematic aspects. The central claim of postcolonial scholars that focus on the insuperable differences between diverse contexts is that any comparison will inevitably be based on an illegitimate practice of abstraction. In creating a comparative ‘meta-language,’ critics argue, researchers necessarily draw on one particular linguistic tradition,<sup>123</sup> rendering ‘neutral’ comparison impossible. Building on these critiques, some recent approaches in postcolonial studies call for a research methodology that focuses less on actually carrying out comparative work and more on analyzing the “politics of comparison,” i.e., the ways in which agents of empire and their political projects were and are involved in comparative practices.<sup>124</sup> Similarly, approaches that centre on the historical investigation of different ‘practices of comparison’<sup>125</sup> stress the situatedness of the act itself. Consequently, these approaches expand the triad of two *comparata* and a *tertium comparationis* to a tetrad that includes the *situational context* of the comparing actor.<sup>126</sup> According to this approach, the social location of the researcher themselves becomes central to the methodology and conceptual framework of the comparative exercise.

120 Fitzgerald, Timothy, *The Ideology of Religious Studies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 34; Stoler, Ann Laura, “Tense and Tender Ties: The Politics of Comparison in North American History and (Post) Colonial Studies,” *The Journal of American History* 88 (3) (2001): 863.

121 Steinmetz, “Introduction,” 2019, 6.

122 Steinmetz, “Introduction,” 2019, 6.

123 Steinmetz, “Introduction,” 2019, 7.

124 Stoler, “Tense and Tender Ties,” 2001, 862.

125 Epple, Angelika, and Walter Erhart, eds. *Die Welt beobachten. Praktiken des Vergleichens* (Frankfurt a.M.: Campus, 2015).

126 Epple, Angelika, “Doing Comparisons—Ein praexologischer Zugang zur Geschichte der Globalisierung/en.” In *Die Welt beobachten. Praktiken des Vergleichens*, eds. Angelika Epple and Walter Erhart (Frankfurt a.M.: Campus, 2015), 163.

### 3.1.2.2 *Comparison and the Challenge of 'Provincializing Europe'*

In a recent article, Michael Bergunder discusses the insights of postcolonial criticism of comparison and attempts to apply them to the comparative study of religion.<sup>127</sup> To him, the crucial point of any comparative endeavour is the selection and concretisation of the 'point of comparison' (*tertium comparationis*). In this process, the common ground for comparison is identified, and comparability is established as the abstraction of one particular element. Usually, this means that the point of comparison has a privileged relationship to one of the comparands.<sup>128</sup> Only as a result of this first comparative act of establishing similarity on the basis of one of the compared elements can relative differences and similarities be determined. This process usually results in an affirmation of the chosen point of comparison, which in most cases is indeed taken from a Western context, and therefore contributes to its justification and universalization.

In his proposal for a 'provincialization' of Europe, historian Dipesh Chakrabarty has famously called for a historicization of this positioning of 'Europe' as the unquestioned prototype for scholarly comparisons.<sup>129</sup> According to him, this cannot simply be rectified through a reversal of the prototypical relationship, i.e., by privileging 'non-Western' categories as *tertia comparationis*, since there is no way in which we can "situate ourselves outside of the knowledge procedures of our institutions"<sup>130</sup> or outside our "postcolonial present."<sup>131</sup> We have all become "conscripts of modernity" in a world in which all "difference [...] is increasingly obliged to respond to—and be managed by—the categories brought into play by European modernity."<sup>132</sup> As a result, the universalized terms of European theory "have a global history that inherently informs their meaning and plausibility" and are "nowadays [...] used globally."<sup>133</sup> Euro-

127 Bergunder, Michael, "Comparison in the Maelstrom of Historicity: A Postcolonial Perspective on Comparative Religion." In *Interreligious Comparisons in Religious Studies and Theology: Comparison Revisited*, eds. Perry Schmidt-Leukel and Andreas Nehring (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 34–52.

128 Bergunder, "Comparison in the Maelstrom of Historicity," 2016, 36–37.

129 Chakrabarty, Dipesh, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); see Bergunder, "Comparison in the Maelstrom of Historicity," 2016, 38; and Austin, Gareth, "Reciprocal Comparison and African History: Tackling Conceptual Eurocentrism in the Study of Africa's Economic Past," *African Studies Review* 50 (3) (2007): 8–14.

130 Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 2000, 43.

131 Scott, David, *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 107.

132 Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity*, 2004, 9, 119.

133 Bergunder, "Comparison in the Maelstrom of Historicity," 2016, 40, 39.

pean concepts and theoretical frameworks thus form the basis of both scholarly projects and everyday understandings of the social world.<sup>134</sup> Following Chakrabarty, Bergunder therefore proposes a global history approach to comparison that accounts for both the continuing relevance of Europe as the universal prototype *and* its historicisation.<sup>135</sup>

According to Bergunder, researchers should approach comparison in a way that allows them to account for the persistence of Western conceptual hegemony while simultaneously unveiling it as the result of historical processes. The continued use of established *tertia comparationis*, like 'religion,' but also 'slavery' or 'freedom,' as global categories, does not necessarily have to cement their authority. Rather, it calls for genealogical investigations of such universalized terms of European theories *in relation to* the European prototypes from which they were abstracted. In practice, this investigative shift points towards a global history approach that avoids 'thinking of origins in terms of regional provenance' (*regionalisiertes Ursprungsdenken*)<sup>136</sup> and instead tries to understand the emergence of our analytical categories as the result of processes of global entanglements.<sup>137</sup>

134 For this reason, one could also argue that most of the variants of the "multiple modernities" approach are not particularly helpful in overcoming this problem. See Eisenstadt, Shmuel N., ed., *Multiple Modernities* (Somerset: Routledge, 2002); Schwinn, Thomas, "Multiple Modernities: Konkurrierende Thesen und offene Fragen. Ein Literaturbericht in konstruktiver Absicht." *Zeitschrift für Soziologie* 38 (6) (2009): 454–476. In trying to move beyond 'Western hegemony' they fail to recognize both the historical and ongoing dominance of 'the West' that Chakrabarty captures so well. The contemporary world, as a result of contingent historical processes, is still a world profoundly shaped by hegemonic Western (conceptual) power. See Asad, Talal, "Conscripts of Western Civilization." In *Civilization in Crisis: Anthropological Perspectives*, ed. Christine Ward Gailey. Vol. 1 of *Dialectical Anthropology: Essays in Honor of Stanley Diamond* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1992), 333–351; Scott, David, *Refashioning Futures: Criticism, After Postcoloniality* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999); Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity*, 2004.

135 Bergunder, "Comparison in the Maelstrom of Historicity," 2016, 45–47.

136 Bergunder, Michael, "Umkämpfte Historisierung. Die Zwillingengeburt von 'Religion' und 'Esoterik' in der zweiten Hälfte des 19. Jahrhunderts und das Programm einer globalen Religionsgeschichte." In *Wissen um Religion: Epistemologie und Episteme in Religionswissenschaft und Interkultureller Theologie*, ed. Klaus Hock (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2020), 66–77.

137 Strube, Julian, *Global Tantra: Religion, Science, and Nationalism Colonial Modernity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), 19–20; see also Hermann, Adrian, "European History of Religion, Global History of Religion: On the Expansion of a Gladigowian Concept for the Study of Religion." In *Die kulturwissenschaftliche Wende in der Religionswissenschaft: Der Beitrag Burkhard Gladigows / The Cultural Turn in the Study of Religion: The Contribution of Burkhard Gladigow*, eds. Christoph Auffarth, Alexandra Grieser, and Anne Koch (Tübingen: Tübingen University Press, 2021), 237–268.

### 3.2 *Elements of Modeling Comparison for Dependency Studies*

#### 3.2.1 Comparison in a Micro-Spatial Perspective

The notion of connected or entangled histories<sup>138</sup> is a useful starting point for grappling with the problems of comparison that arise in the context of slavery and dependency studies. Drawing on such perspectives, labour historians like Christian De Vito and Anne Gerritsen have proposed a microhistorical approach to social history and introduced the concept of “micro-spatial history.”<sup>139</sup> They claim that “microhistory” can provide the “epistemological foundations” for a renewed social history “through its sensitivity to contextualization and historical distinctiveness through time and space,” while “spatial history can help micro-history to overcome its tendency to remain confined in geographically limited spaces and to conceptualise localities as self-sufficient units.”<sup>140</sup> However, in proposing to think “beyond the local/global divide” and to study “connected singularities,” micro-spatial history rejects macro-analytical comparisons because they presuppose large units and theoretically isolate them. Instead, as De Vito argues, comparisons should concentrate on “direct and indirect entanglements between the units that are being compared.”<sup>141</sup> In his view, “these [micro-spatial] approaches make us rethink comparison as the analysis of the dialectics between the specificity and connectivity of each place, and as the ethnographic study of the impact of multifaceted connections on different sites.”<sup>142</sup> According to De Vito, comparison should, therefore, be primarily concerned with tracing connections between *comparanda* and the “context” of individual constellations. Therefore, “the distinctiveness of each site,” should not be thought to “stem from its isolation, but rather from the specificity of the connections that animate it.”<sup>143</sup> As such, “the context of a social process lies in multiple localities, individuals, objects and knowledges.”<sup>144</sup>

138 Conrad, Sebastian, and Shalini Randeria, eds. *Jenseits des Eurozentrismus: Postkoloniale Perspektiven in den Geschichts- und Kulturwissenschaften* (Frankfurt a.M.: Campus-Verl, 2002); Subrahmanyam, Sanjay, “Connected Histories: Notes towards a Reconfiguration of Early Modern Eurasia,” *Modern Asian Studies* 31 (3) (1997): 735–762.

139 De Vito, Christian G., and Anne Gerritsen, “Micro-Spatial Histories of Global Labour: Towards a new Global History.” In *Micro-Spatial Histories of Global Labour*, eds. Christian G. De Vito and Anne Gerritsen (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018a), 1–28; De Vito, “History Without Scale,” 2019.

140 De Vito and Gerritsen, “Micro-Spatial Histories of Global Labour,” 2018, 15.

141 De Vito, “History Without Scale,” 2019, 358.

142 De Vito, “History Without Scale,” 2019, 358.

143 De Vito, “History Without Scale,” 2019, 356.

144 De Vito, “History Without Scale,” 2019, 361.

Nonetheless, the microhistorical approach is not limited to such “connected comparisons” but “can stimulate comparisons between pertinent contexts [...] that are chronologically or spatially unconnected, but unified by common research questions (rather than by predefined models and taxonomies).”<sup>145</sup> The critique of certain forms of abstraction apparent in the formulation of “predefined models and taxonomies” originates from a critical view of macro-sociological analysis and comparison. It also implies a rejection of the notion of ‘scale’ as a vertical ordering of the social (micro, meso, macro), which emerged from debates within radical geography.<sup>146</sup> This approach proposes to treat scale “as a social construction and an object of historical research” rather than as an analytical tool,<sup>147</sup> especially when adopting a praxeological approach that implies a “flat ontology.”<sup>148</sup>

### 3.2.2 Modes, Scales, Scopes, and the Five Operations of Comparison

In his recent comprehensive monograph on the comparative method in the study of religion, historian Oliver Freiberger suggests that the initial steps for comparison are the abstraction of the comparands, i.e., the units being compared<sup>149</sup> and the establishment of the *tertium comparationis* (the ‘point of comparison’).<sup>150</sup> In terms of the *practice* of comparison, he distinguishes between modes, scales, and scopes of comparison. *Modes* describe the “different styles of comparison” that reflect the general goals of a particular study, *scales* indicate the level of ‘zooming in’ along an axis of micro, meso, and macro comparison, and the *scopes* focus on the “potential relations between the comparands” in order to distinguish between “contextual, cross-cultural, and transhistorical comparisons.”<sup>151</sup>

Freiberger considers two *modes* to be of particular relevance to the study of religion: In the “taxonomic mode” of comparison, drawing on other cases serves to recognize blind spots in the study of a particular case and to further its

145 De Vito, “History Without Scale,” 2019, 362–363.

146 Marston, Jones, and Woodward, “Human Geography Without Scale,” 2005; Wissen, Markus, and Matthias Naumann, “Dialectics of Spatial Assimilation and Differentiation: The Uneven-Development Concept in Radical Geography,” *ACME: An International Journal for Critical Geographies* 7 (3) (2008): 377–406.

147 De Vito, “History Without Scale,” 2019, 348.

148 Schatzki, “Practice Theory as Flat Ontology,” 2016.

149 Freiberger, Oliver, *Considering Comparison: A Method for Religious Studies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 82–94.

150 Freiberger, *Considering Comparison*, 2019, 94–96.

151 Freiberger, *Considering Comparison*, 2019, 115–116.

analysis.<sup>152</sup> Meanwhile, the “illuminative mode” aims at a symmetric comparison based on scholarly categories as “consciously constructed abstractions”<sup>153</sup> and should lead to generalizations and acts of classification akin to biological taxonomy. The second-order categories produced in this process have to be constantly revised. The different modes of comparison are not mutually exclusive but can overlap or appear side by side.<sup>154</sup>

The selection of the comparands already indicates a certain level of abstraction (individuals, groups, cities, regions, states, etc.) and stipulates the appropriate *scale* of the comparison.<sup>155</sup> Traditionally, the terms ‘micro,’ ‘meso,’ and ‘macro’ have been used to describe these different scales. But more important than the choice of scale is the willingness to consider objections to this choice, like superficiality, essentialization, or arbitrariness.<sup>156</sup> The choice of scale also implies a theoretical construction of comparands at *all* three levels (micro, meso, and macro). Therefore, Freiburger argues, “a micro comparative approach does not automatically prevent essentialization.”<sup>157</sup> Rather than concentrating on a single scale, he proposes a “responsible research design” which “avoids drawing conclusions that transgress the limits set by the selected scale.”<sup>158</sup>

The *scope* of any given comparison, according to Freiburger, is “the distance between the items compared in a study,” which also “indicates potential relations between the comparands.”<sup>159</sup> He further distinguishes between contextual, cross-cultural, and transhistorical scopes.<sup>160</sup> The contextual scope describes comparisons within a shared historical, spatial, and cultural environment.<sup>161</sup> It usually assumes direct—but not necessarily local—relations between the compared items (a “homology”), but establishes their nature (e.g., “negotiations,” “mutual appropriations,” or “reciprocal impact”) only as a result of the study.<sup>162</sup> Comparisons on a cross-cultural scope go “beyond postulated cultural boundaries” by comparing items from “different cultural spheres or milieus” without assuming them to be historically related. The identified simi-

152 Freiburger, *Considering Comparison*, 2019, 126–127.

153 Freiburger, *Considering Comparison*, 2019, 119, 127.

154 Freiburger, *Considering Comparison*, 2019, 129.

155 Freiburger, *Considering Comparison*, 2019, 131.

156 Freiburger, *Considering Comparison*, 2019, 134.

157 Freiburger, *Considering Comparison*, 2019, 140.

158 Freiburger, *Considering Comparison*, 2019, 143.

159 Freiburger, *Considering Comparison*, 2019, 143.

160 Freiburger, *Considering Comparison*, 2019, 143.

161 Freiburger, *Considering Comparison*, 2019, 144.

162 Freiburger, *Considering Comparison*, 2019, 145.

larities are “not expected to be caused by influence, dependency, or any other direct relationship.”<sup>163</sup> Understood in this sense, cross-cultural comparisons are always analogical.<sup>164</sup> The transhistorical scope applies to “comparisons across time” and is always combined with one of the other two scopes.<sup>165</sup>

Freiberger’s model of the concrete practice of comparison proposes five separate operations: “selection, description and analysis, juxtaposition, redescription, and rectification/theory formation.”<sup>166</sup> The *selection* of the comparands and point of comparison, as well as of scope, scale, and mode of comparison establishes the basis for a contextualised *description and analysis* of the comparands via a “double contextualization,”<sup>167</sup> i.e., regarding both the historical-cultural and the existing scholarly context.<sup>168</sup> Through *juxtaposition*, the comparands are related in a way that attempts to establish both their similarities and differences vis-à-vis the chosen *tertium comparationis*. The last step in Freiberger’s model consists of a renewed description of the comparands and a *rectification* of the second-order or “meta-linguistic” categories used in the comparison.

An alternative model of comparison was recently proposed by Egil Asprem for the study of Esotericism.<sup>169</sup> It consists of a matrix of four types of comparison along the two axes *analogical/homological* and *synchronic/diachronic*. “Homological similarities” are based on a common ancestry, while “analogical similarities” are independent of direct relations. Asprem’s *synchronic/diachronic* distinction refers to the temporal dimension of comparison, i.e., to comparisons within the same period or those across historical epochs. His combination of the two axes results in four types of comparison: (1) The *Analogical-synchronic* type compares two contemporaneous phenomena with respect to “some analytic construct or feature.”<sup>170</sup> (2) The *analogical-diachronic* type compares phenomena from different historical periods “without grounding the

163 Freiberger, *Considering Comparison*, 2019, 146.

164 Freiberger, *Considering Comparison*, 2019, 147.

165 Freiberger, *Considering Comparison*, 2019, 148.

166 Freiberger, *Considering Comparison*, 2019, 150–160.

167 Smith, Jonathan Zittel, “The ‘End’ of Comparison. Redescription and Rectification.” In *A Magic Still Dwells: Comparative Religion in the Postmodern Age*, eds. Kimberly C. Patton, and Benjamin C. Ray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 239.

168 Freiberger, *Considering Comparison*, 2019, 153.

169 Asprem, Egil, “Beyond the West: Towards a New Comparativism in the Study of Esotericism,” *Correspondences: Online Journal for the Academic Study of Western Esotericism* 2 (1) (2014): 21–22. Accessed May 6, 2021. <https://correspondencesjournal.com/12302-2/>.

170 Asprem, “Beyond the West,” 2014, 23.

comparison in a genealogical link between them.<sup>171</sup> In both cases, the comparison establishes or refines analytical meta-linguistic categories. In contrast, (3) a *homological-synchronic* type of comparison looks for common genealogical relations between contemporaneous phenomena, which would justify their comparison “with regard to a theoretically relevant tertium comparationis.”<sup>172</sup> Finally, (4) the *homological-diachronic* type of comparison, establishes a temporal genealogical relationship between two comparands (*a* is the ancestor of *b*) and often aims to establish “significant *discontinuities*.”<sup>173</sup> In the end, Asprem argues that what is needed to successfully implement “drastic revisions to classification”—like the ones implied by the analytical concept of asymmetrical dependency—is a “combination of analogical and homological comparison.”<sup>174</sup> If one were to make use of Asprem’s typology, without restricting oneself to his rather ‘biological’ understanding of homology, it might be useful to combine it with Freiberger’s proposal of reframing homological comparisons as “relational comparison[s].”<sup>175</sup> In doing so, one would still presuppose direct relations between comparands but would establish them only as the result of the comparison, not as its prerequisite.

### 3.3 *Challenges of Comparison for Dependency Studies*

In the following section, we will draw on both the practice-oriented approach to asymmetrical dependency outlined in part 2 of this paper and the approaches to comparison outlined above (3.2). Our aim is to lay down some cornerstones for the future development of comparative models in dependency studies.

#### 3.3.1 A Self-Reflective and Transparent Choice of Comparands and *Tertium Comparationis*

The process of determining the comparands and the *tertium comparationis* forms the basis of any comparative endeavor. Replacing the binary of slavery and freedom with the analytical concept of asymmetrical dependency, therefore, raises the question of alternative *tertia comparationis*. One possibility would be to treat the phenomenon of ‘asymmetrical dependency’ itself as the point of comparison. Alternatively, the concept of ‘(inter)agency’ could be considered as a possible *tertium*. Both options point to an understanding of

171 Asprem, “Beyond the West,” 2014, 23.

172 Asprem, “Beyond the West,” 2014, 25.

173 Asprem, “Beyond the West,” 2014, 25.

174 Asprem, “Beyond the West,” 2014, 30.

175 Freiberger, *Considering Comparison*, 2019, 145.

comparison according to which different case studies are evaluated in terms of divergent configurations of asymmetrical dependency or (inter)agency. In any case, whether the focus lies on ‘asymmetrical dependency’ in different social orders more generally or on ‘agency’ in order to explore situated forms of restraint and to locate them on a continuum of dependency in particular historical situations, a clear and transparent choice of a point of comparison is crucial in moving away from studying different forms of ‘slavery’ (a *tertium* for which the historical prototypes are abstractions of Graeco-Roman and transatlantic examples) and towards studying relations of asymmetrical dependencies.

However, simply applying the alternative and deliberately wide analytical concept of asymmetrical dependency which, depending on the individual project, might also serve as a *tertium comparationis*, will not automatically rid us of our Eurocentric perspective on the observed phenomena. As Chakrabarty rightly asserted, neither foregoing a particular terminology nor simply replacing Western prototypes of slavery as the privileged reference points for comparison will sufficiently address these issues. Rather, in an act of ‘provincialization,’ individual projects in the field should strive to reflect on what a *historicization* of their chosen point of comparison might mean for their practices of that methodology. Since, historically, Atlantic and/or Graeco-Roman slaveries have (often implicitly) served as reference points for investigations of relations of asymmetrical dependency, researchers must consider the global history of categories like these and critically explore them.<sup>176</sup> This critical endeavour should also include a reflection on how existing practices of comparison have framed and thereby conceptually shaped these historical phenomena as comparable.<sup>177</sup> Such a self-reflection on the ways in which the history of the slavery-versus-freedom distinction itself “inherently informs [...] [its] meaning and plausibility,”<sup>178</sup> i.e., how this problematised binary itself contributes to making different phenomena comparable, could help us move beyond comparative methodologies that both perpetrate and camouflage European hegemony.

In practice this means that researchers need to demonstrate awareness and transparency in determining the units and especially the point of comparison as these decisions “determine [...] the scale and scope of the comparison.”<sup>179</sup> Even if one does not wish to think in terms of “scale,” each comparative study should begin with a reflection on the way in which the *comparanda* and the *tertium* have historically been conceptualized. Following the historicization of

176 Bergunder, “Comparison in the Maelstrom of Historicity,” 2016, 39.

177 Bergunder, “Comparison in the Maelstrom of Historicity,” 2016, 45.

178 Bergunder, “Comparison in the Maelstrom of Historicity,” 2016, 40.

179 Freiburger, *Considering Comparison*, 2019, 151.

the units and point of comparison, researchers can proceed with formulating concrete “counter histories”<sup>180</sup> that subvert prevailing narratives and binary constructions of slavery and freedom. These “counter histories” can empower scholars to reckon with a continuum of asymmetrical dependency within specific units of comparison. Thus, we can achieve greater clarity regarding local, contextual, and epochal occurrences of the phenomenon.

### 3.3.2 Determining the Scale and Scope of Comparison

Instead of distinguishing only between synchronic and diachronic comparisons, researchers in the field of dependency studies should consider different types, modes, scales, scopes, and operations of comparison to describe and characterize their projects. Making use of some of the elaborate typologies and reflections on the comparative method that have been developed in various disciplines in recent decades might facilitate a more responsible and sophisticated practice of comparison. If researchers do not find the approaches outlined in this paper applicable to their work, perhaps they will be inspired by one or more of the many other existing models of comparison.<sup>181</sup>

At the same time, we must recognize that applying the concept of asymmetrical dependency in global and transhistorical comparisons points to questions of a particular comparison’s scope and scale. Can we answer these questions using the framework described by Freiberger, or are there limitations to this approach? Some global history<sup>182</sup> and micro-spatial approaches reject the notion of scale all together. Instead, they stress “direct and indirect entanglements between the units that are being compared”<sup>183</sup> as a prerequisite for responsible comparisons. Regarding scope, the growing awareness of entanglements along with the emphasis placed on localized phenomena by those who employ micro-spatial approaches complicates the question of whether it

180 Bergunder, “Umkämpfte Historisierung,” 2020, 75.

181 E.g., Haupt, Heinz-Gerhard, and Jürgen Kocka, eds. *Comparative and Transnational History. Central European Approaches and New Perspectives* (New York: Berghahn, 2009); Van der Veer, Peter, *The Value of Comparison* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016); Deville, Joe, Michael Guggenheim, and Zuzana Hrdličková, eds. *Practising Comparison: Logics, Relations, Collaborations* (Manchester: Mattering Press, 2016); Candea, Matei, *Comparison in Anthropology: The Impossible Method* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019); Steinmetz, “Introduction,” 2019; Epple, Angelika, Walter Erhard, and Johannes Grave, eds. *Practices of Comparing: Towards a New Understanding of Fundamental Human Practice* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2020); Groth, Stefan, “Introduction: Comparison as Social and Cultural Practice,” *Cultural Analysis* 18 (1) (2020): 1–4.

182 Epple, “Globale Mikrogeschichte,” 2012.

183 De Vito, “History Without Scale,” 2019, 358.

is enough for researchers to merely anticipate possible relations between comparands.<sup>184</sup> This challenge arises from the fact that the “unit of analysis” no longer coincides “with one single place, connection or individual, but with the whole of the networks created by their interactions.”<sup>185</sup> Growing awareness of the way interactions generate networks of meaning within and between localities fundamentally calls into question the usefulness of transcultural comparisons that are not based on tracing “multiple exchanges” and entanglements.<sup>186</sup>

While we agree that it is important to rethink comparison in light of such critiques, we also want to remain open to the possibility of macro-analytical comparisons. Additionally, as mentioned above, we would assert that within a micro-spatial approach to dependency, methodological generalisations based on common research questions remain possible, as it is particularly “ontological conceptualizations of scale” that are seen as problematic.<sup>187</sup> Furthermore, we propose that in thinking about transcultural and transhistorical comparisons the praxeological perspective on asymmetrical dependency outlined in this paper, a micro-spatial approach, and a systems-theoretical perspective based on world society theory<sup>188</sup> might fruitfully inform each other.

Despite its reputation as a purely macro-sociological method, a systems-theoretical perspective that focuses on the radical operativity of the social<sup>189</sup>

184 Freiberger, *Considering Comparison*, 2019, 145.

185 De Vito, “History Without Scale,” 2019, 361.

186 De Vito, “History Without Scale,” 2019, 358.

187 De Vito, “History Without Scale,” 2019, 363, 355.

188 Stichweh, Rudolf, *Die Weltgesellschaft: Soziologische Analysen* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 2000); Stichweh, Rudolf, “Conceptual Structures for a Theory of World Society.” In *Challenges of Globalization and Prospects for an Inter-civilizational World Order*, ed. Ino Rossi (Cham: Springer, 2020), 89–104; Stichweh, “How Do Divided Societies Come About?,” 2021.

189 Nassehi, Armin, “Die Theorie funktionaler Differenzierung im Horizont ihrer Kritik,” *Zeitschrift für Soziologie* 33 (2) (2004): 98–118; idem, “Vom Ende der zweiwertigen Soziologie zu einer operativen Theorie der Gesellschaft.” In *Begriffe—Positionen—Debatten: Eine Relektüre von 65 Jahren Soziale Welt*, eds. Norman Braun, Julian Müller, Armin Nassehi, Irmhild Saake, and Tobias Wolbring (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2014), 104–106. Systems theory discusses structures—on all ‘scales’ if we want to use this notion—regarding the improbability of communication. See Luhmann, Niklas, “The Improbability of Communication,” *International Social Science Journal* 33 (1) (1981): 122–132. The self-stabilization of communications into social systems and the emergence of societal structures cannot be explained by *a priori* defined societal domains or functions, but has to be understood as the result of continuous chains of communicative events. See Nassehi, Armin, “Funktionale Differenzierung—revisited: Vom Setzkasten zur Echtzeitmaschine.” In *Gesellschaftsbilder im Umbruch: Soziologische Perspektiven in Deutschland*, eds. Eva Barlösius, Hans-Peter Müller, and Steffen Sigmund (Opladen: Leske and Budrich, 2001), 157–159. In

and stresses the global interconnectedness of world society as the “one socio-cultural space which includes all sociality and communication into the boundaries of a singular societal system”<sup>190</sup> could productively be brought into conversation with an understanding of the social as “a mass of linked practices and arrangements that is spread out across the globe.”<sup>191</sup> Careful consideration of the compatibility between such an approach and a micro-spatial perspective that champions microhistory but also highlights spatiality in addressing the “multiple connections among places and temporalities”<sup>192</sup> in order to overcome the local versus global and micro versus macro divides is a future challenge for dependency studies.

### 3.3.3 Comparing to What End? Taxonomies of Asymmetrical Dependency and the Value of an Analytical Concept

A transcultural and comparative perspective on asymmetrical dependency also suggests thinking in more detail about the benefits and pitfalls of taxonomic and analogical comparisons.<sup>193</sup> How are we to relate concepts like asymmetrical dependency and agency to these modes of comparison? How can individual case studies of asymmetrical dependency contribute to developing a “systematics of dependency phenomena”<sup>194</sup> that results in the construction of

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this sense, the stability of societal structures is something that has to be explained, rather than treated as a pre-existing foundation of society. As the sedimented result of historical processes, structures continuously have to ‘prove’ themselves in the present. See Nassehi, Armin, “Die Theorie funktionaler Differenzierung,” 2004, 104. They exist only as series of communicative events that constantly re-stabilize themselves. See Nassehi, Armin, *Der soziologische Diskurs der Moderne* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 2006), 252. On an “operational theory [...] of order formation” see also Lindemann, Gesa, *Approaches to the World: The Multiple Dimensions of the Social* (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2021), 77–229. In any case, thinking about ‘scale’ in the context of systems theory also has to take into account the distinction between the levels of interaction, organization, and society proposed by Luhmann, Niklas, “Interaktion, Organisation, Gesellschaft.” In *Soziologische Aufklärung 2: Aufsätze zur Theorie der Gesellschaft* (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1975), 9–20; see also Heintz, Bettina and Hartmann Tyrell, eds. *Interaktion—Organisation—Gesellschaft revisited: Anwendungen, Erweiterungen, Alternativen* (Stuttgart: Lucius & Lucius, 2015).

190 Stichweh, “Conceptual Structures for a Theory of World Society,” 2020, 90.

191 See also Schatzki, “Practice Theory as Flat Ontology,” 2016, 32; Schatzki, Theodore R., “Materiality and Social Life,” *Nature and Culture* 5 (2) (2010): 130.

192 De Vito and Gerritsen, “Micro-Spatial Histories of Global Labour,” 2018, 4.

193 See Freiberger, *Considering Comparison*, 2019, 116–131.

194 Antweiler, Christoph, “On Dependence, Dependency, and a Dependency Turn: An Essay with Systematic Intent,” *BCDSS Concept Paper* 2, 2022, 1. [https://www.dependency.uni-bonn.de/images/pdf-files/antweiler\\_on-dependence-dependency-and-a-dependency-turn.pdf](https://www.dependency.uni-bonn.de/images/pdf-files/antweiler_on-dependence-dependency-and-a-dependency-turn.pdf).

a “processual typology”?<sup>195</sup> In line with Freiberger, one could argue that this goal of classification can only be achieved through taxonomic comparisons which produce and refine “metalinguistic categories” that allow for generalizations while being “subject to constant revision.”<sup>196</sup> De Vito, on the other hand, argues, that in a micro-spatial perspective “procedures of generalization are essentially methodological” and are focused on “the *way* the context is selected and the problem addressed,” rather than on the content of particular historical findings.<sup>197</sup> Nevertheless, he argues that microhistory can address “large historical questions in highly contextualized studies,”<sup>198</sup> in particular through focusing on the ‘exceptional normal.’<sup>199</sup> This raises the question of the relationship between and the relative importance of a) large quantities of comparative empirical data that can form the basis for a typology of asymmetrical dependency, and b) detailed microhistorical explorations of individual cases whose comparative value lies precisely in their status as representatives of ‘exceptional normal,’ and which thus reveal ‘hidden’ structures not accessible through other sources.<sup>200</sup> If we reject “universal concepts and taxonomies of macro-analytical history” as oversimplifying historical processes,<sup>201</sup> can we develop alternative ways of achieving taxonomical goals? We might also ask, are the only useful comparisons in dependency studies which the analytical concept proposed here facilitates those between two cases in which we identify social relations of asymmetrical dependency? Or, might the generalizing impulse of the taxonomic mode also allow us to compare situations where agency is expressed within systems of asymmetrical dependency and instances where we do not perceive such agency to be present?

However these questions are answered, the transcultural and transhistorical comparisons enabled by the analytical concept of asymmetrical dependency are central to the future of dependency studies as this is the only way to both refine and (possibly) confirm the preliminary hypothesis that social relations of asymmetrical dependency can be observed crossculturally as well as tran-

195 Antweiler, “On Dependence, Dependency, and a Dependency Turn,” 2022, 14.

196 Freiberger, *Considering Comparison*, 2019, 129.

197 De Vito, “History Without Scale,” 2019, 262.

198 De Vito, “History Without Scale,” 2019, 362.

199 Grendi, Edoardo, “Micro-analisi e storia sociale,” *Quaderni Storici* 12 (35.2) (1977): 506–520; Medick, Hans, “Entlegene Geschichte? Sozialgeschichte und Mikro-Historie im Blickpunkt der Kulturanthropologie.” In *Zwischen den Kulturen. Die Sozialwissenschaften vor dem Problem des Kulturvergleichs*, ed. Joachim Matthes (Göttingen: Schwartz, 1992), 173–174.

200 Medick 1992, “Entlegene Geschichte?,” 173–174, fn 17.

201 De Vito, “History Without Scale,” 2019, 362.

shistorically, and that these structures are somehow 'formative' for the stability, durability, and continuity of (most) human social orders. A more detailed theoretical and methodological exploration of comparison therefore seems of great importance for the future of the field.

#### 4 Conclusion

We hope that the thoughts and arguments outlined in this paper will contribute to a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the proposed concept of asymmetrical dependency. While the conceptual approach employed here naturally began with a critique of the binary between slavery and freedom, and will undoubtedly continue to draw insights from other fields like labour history, gender studies, and postcolonial theory, we understand dependency studies as the logical augmentation of the existing field of slavery studies. To introduce the state of the art and to point toward anticipated developments, we offered some theoretical considerations on the analytical concept of asymmetrical dependency. Our approach centered around two main theoretical and methodological issues in research relevant to the emerging field of dependency studies: 1) the attempt to analyze relations of asymmetrical dependency with the help of concepts associated with critical theory, practice theory, and new materialism; and 2) the challenge of comparison.

Based on our understanding of asymmetrical dependency as a dynamic relational process, we employed a primarily praxeological methodology in section 2 that identified and described some key dynamics of such relations across time and space. We argued that relations of asymmetrical dependency and the social orders that stabilize them have to be continually and actively shaped. While this leaves dependency relations potentially unstable and transitory, they are usually reinforced in practice both by repeated sayings and doings and by being embedded in greater webs or constellations of dependency.

Replacing the slavery vs. freedom binary with the concept of asymmetrical dependency and adopting the praxeological approach employed in section 2 implies a comparative approach. In section 3 we, therefore, first explored several critiques of comparison with a focus on the challenge of historicizing and provincializing common *tertia comparationis* and theoretical categories. We then elaborated upon some theoretical models of comparison that facilitate the linking of different historical and contemporary case studies. Throughout the process, we related these models to the study of asymmetrical dependency.

It goes without saying that we left many questions unanswered and some even untouched in this paper. For example, we have not (explicitly) discussed

the relevance of the adjectives 'strong' or 'enduring' to the overall conceptualisation of asymmetrical dependency despite the central role they play in the preliminary definition of the phenomenon. The inclusion of these qualifiers currently carries significant weight in attempts to define the scope of asymmetrical dependency and, thus, dependency studies. A detailed discussion of the precise meaning of these notions (i.e. do they refer to the duration and stability of the relation and/or its quality, etc.?) is needed but has to be deferred to another paper. Another crucial point that requires further reflection is the (ultimately ethical and political) question of how to steer clear of an ontological understanding of asymmetrical dependency and, thus, make conceivable a society without such relations. These limitations notwithstanding, we believe we have addressed some crucial points that have emerged at this stage in the development of the field of dependency studies. We hope our work will therefore serve as a point of departure for future discussions on the value of the analytical concept of asymmetrical dependency.

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