

# Comparative History: Its History, Challenges, and Debates

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## Abstract

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Comparative history has a long tradition beginning from Greek historiography. It is especially useful in validating hypotheses, finding causal relations and addressing peculiarities. It is a resilient method since it is compatible with both macro and micro cases. However, it has faced challenges from the 1960s from postmodernism and the cultural turn. These turns pointed out several weaknesses of the approach. Some of the studies were done with asymmetrical comparison while others were clouded with methodological nationalism. The language barrier also poses an important challenge to it. Lastly, it pulled out the studied object from time and space.

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## 1. Introduction

Comparative history can be traced back to Greek historiography, long before the term was coined. It is a popular method of inquiry, although it has no discipline of its own. It is when one studies historical events systematically to find similarities and differences in similar contexts to contribute to their better description.<sup>1</sup> This is because it is used by many disciplines. Many people are interested in it. This due to its resilience and 'scientific' appeal.<sup>2</sup> It has some obvious benefits that its user could enjoy such as the ability to address peculiarity or validating the result from the hypothesis. In many cases, the cause of the event is not clear to the historian. By the comparative method, one can find it easier to find a causal relation between events by finding similarities and highlighting them. It is especially advantageous to compare a macro case which needs to be seen from a macro perspective since it gives the historian homogeneity. It is also compatible with a smaller scale of units of study as well, as long as the unit of inquiry is comparable. Lastly, it mainly relies on the quantitative aspect of the comparison which gave it the label of being 'scientific'.<sup>3</sup>

However, we can see that qualitative comparison is used by some historians. It is still labeled as more 'scientific' than other methods of inquiry because it seeks similarities from other cases to validate the hypothesis. Even though comparative history enjoys several benefits, it still has faced some challenges from the 1960s on. The Postmodern turn directly undermines comparative history because it does not believe in homogeneity and grand narrative, the assumption and the goal of comparative history<sup>4</sup>. The Cultural turn, a sub-movement of the Postmodernist movement, also highlights the importance of the role of mindset and culture of people and decision-makers, something taken for granted by the structuralist. It has highlighted drawbacks of

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<sup>1</sup> Jürgen Kocka and Heinz-Gerhard Haupt, "Comparison and Beyond: Traditions, Scope and Perspective of Comparative History," in *Comparative and Transnational History: Central European Approaches and New Perspectives*, ed. Heinz-Gerhard Haupt, and Jürgen Kocka (New York: Oxford, 2009), 2.

<sup>2</sup> George Steinmetz, "Comparative History and its Critics: A Genealogy and a Possible Solution," in *A Companion to Global Historical Thought*, ed. Prasenjit Duara, Viren Murthy, and Andrew Sartori (Malden: Massachusetts, 2014), 423.

<sup>3</sup> James Mahoney, and Dietrich Rueschmeyer, "Comparative Historical Analysis: Achievements and Agendas," in *Comparative Historical Analysis in the Social Sciences*, ed. James Mahoney and Dietrich Rueschmeyer (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 16-17 .

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 22-23.

the structuralist approach which assumes the homogeneity and rational choice from its actors when the reality is different.<sup>5</sup>

From these challenges, we can see some drawbacks of comparative history. Moreover, it also has its own weakness from itself too. Although methodological nationalism is commonly found in historical studies, it is easier to be found in comparative history. It usually comes with asymmetrical comparison. When one purposefully compares the other as inferior or backward, this reinforces the stereotype of those people as much as their identity which might result in negative consequences. The more one tries to do, the more one has to rely on secondary sources which might contain bias from the author or interpreter. In addition, the larger the case is, the more the conclusion is comprehensive and less specific which might render the conclusion useless from the point of view of common sense. Another problem of comparative history is that it took the studied object out from time and space which makes it harder to see connections to adjacent territory or to its own history. This argument is advocated by the scholars of transnational history and *histoire croisee*.<sup>6</sup> Lastly, it has a tendency to lead to the monocausal trap because the object of inquiry is the historian's focal point and therefore, could lead to a false impression that it is the cause of the event when it is actually just one factor that might not even be the main one.

## 2. Transnational History, Histoire Croisee and Comparative History

As mentioned above, comparative history focuses on systematic finding of similarities and difference between two or more objects of study. Transnational history and *Histoire Croisee* which are also known as entangled history, focusing on entanglement, share some aspects with comparative history. Transnational history focuses on the connections and circulations between societies.<sup>7</sup> Although it puts emphasis on the transfer between

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 5, 9, 22-24.

<sup>6</sup> Peter Baldwin, "Comparing and Generalizing: Why all History is Comparative, Yet No History is Sociology," in *Comparison and History: Europe in Cross-National Perspective*, ed. Deborah Cohen and Maura O'Connor (New York: Routledge, 2004), 31-35.

<sup>7</sup> Padraic Kenney and Gerd-Rainer Horn, "Introduction: Approaches to the Transnational," in *Transnational Moments of Change. Europe 1945, 1968, 1989*, ed. Padraic Kenney and Gerd-Rainer Horn (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004), ix-xi.

areas, it inevitably needs to find similarity between the areas in order to be able to validate if the transfer actually exists.<sup>8</sup> It gave rise to transfer studies. *Histoire Croisee* gives more emphasis on the entanglement in the area. Both transnational history and *Histoire Croisee* rose from Trans-Atlantic studies in which three areas across the Atlantic Ocean are deeply entangled.<sup>9</sup> This entanglement went beyond the connections and circulations since it implies that it also has dynamics back and forth between those areas in the transfer of ideas, for instance.<sup>10</sup> However, the study of the entanglement is hugely different from comparative history. Whereas comparative history is interested in symmetrical comparison between units in terms of size and comparability, entanglement studies are interested in the deeply asymmetrical but entangled relationship such as that between colonial powers and their colonies.<sup>11</sup> While entanglement studies criticize comparative studies as too analytical and theoretical, entanglement is much harder to be studied without precise comparison.<sup>12</sup> We can see that the objective of these methods of inquiry is different. Comparative history is interested in finding similarity or peculiarity among similarities whereas transnational history and *Histoire Croisee* is interested in the role of transfer that led to change or hybridity. Nevertheless, comparative history could be complemented by the other two because it, now, has started to consider connections between units of comparison.<sup>13, 14</sup> It also claims to have gone 'beyond comparison' which means to better embed comparison in other intellectual traditions and operations in order to modify it in this process to cope with its new needs and tasks.<sup>15, 16</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Sönke Bauck, and Thomas Maier, "Entangled History," InterAmerican Wiki: Terms - Concepts - Critical Perspectives, accessed March 19, 2022. <https://www.uni-bielefeld.de/einrichtungen/cias/publikationen/wiki/e/entangled-history.xml>

<sup>10</sup> Steinmetz, "Comparative History and its Critics," 412-414.

<sup>11</sup> Kocka and Haup, "Comparison and Beyond," 18-21.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Jürgen Kocka, "Comparison and Beyond," *History and Theory* 42, no. 1 (February 2003): 39-44.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Kocka and Haupt, "Comparison and Beyond," 21.

### 3. A Brief History of Comparative History

As mentioned above, comparative history has its root in Greek historiography. Herodotus wrote *The Histories* comparing Greek states and the world known to him of Eurasia.<sup>17</sup> It was practiced by many historians before the term was coined. It emerged in the field of historical sociology first to investigate how society is developed through time. Its most famous thinker is John Stuart Mill who emphasized the method of difference and agreement.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, this way of thinking is popular in the United States of America for its “Scientific” practice.<sup>19</sup> It spread back to Europe after World War II, with more American influence, in an effort to make the discipline of history more “scientific”.<sup>20</sup> Later, in the 1960s, with the rise of historical institutionalism, it focused on sequence and path dependence, shifting away from rational choice theories and accepted that small events could have huge consequences.<sup>21</sup> As a result, the scholar Theda Skocpol became one of the famous authors of comparative historical case studies in her *States and Social Revolutions*.<sup>22</sup> In the 1970s, with the popularization of the *Sonderweg* thesis debate concerning German exceptionalism, this kind of historiography was popularized in Germany for the advocacy of this thesis.<sup>23</sup> However, as it gained dominance in the United States of America and Germany, transnational history emerged as the counterpart to the *Annales* School in France.<sup>24</sup> Transnational history focused on circulations and connections. Even though the *Histoire Croisee* emphasized trans-Atlantic history, it became another counterpart of comparative history from the 1990s.<sup>25</sup> From these examples, we can see that comparative history is the forefather of many ways of studying history

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<sup>17</sup> Steinmetz. “Comparative History and its Critics,” 417.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 416.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 413.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 421.

<sup>21</sup> Mahoney and Rueschmeyer, “Comparative Historical Analysis,” 11.

<sup>22</sup> Theda Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions: A Comparative Analysis of France, Russia, and China* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

<sup>23</sup> Thomas Welskopp, “Comparative History,” European History Online, accessed December 3, 2010, <http://ieg-ego.eu/en/threads/en/threads/theories-and-methods/comparative-history/thomas-welskopp-comparative-history>

<sup>24</sup> Chris Lorenz, “Comparative Historiography: Problems and Perspectives.” *History and Theory* 38, no. 1 (February 1999): 32-33.

<sup>25</sup> Hartmut Kaelble, “Comparative and Transnational History,” Special issue, *Ricerche di storia politica: Quadrimestrale dell'Associazione per le ricerche di storia politica* (October 2017): 15-24.

that came later. Although these counterparts might undermine the importance and influence of comparative history, many scholars have suggested that these ways of studying history should not be at odds but rather should complement each other.<sup>26</sup>

#### **4. Advantages**

##### **4.1 See What Those Who Study Only One Case Do Not See**

One of the biggest traps for traditional historians is that they are specialized in their field of expertise, but not any others. Even though comparative historians might not know as deeply as traditional historians, their knowledge is more diverse. As a result of comparative work, they might be able to see missing points or connections that traditional historians are unable to see.<sup>27</sup> This is because when one compares two or more cases, one could see the discrepancies or similarities among those cases. In one case that traditional historians specialized in, they might take knowledge of it for granted as normal, but when compared to other cases, it stands out. One salient example is the German labor movement that emerged long before other countries.<sup>28</sup> On the other hand, the peculiar case for one discipline in history might turn out to be common in other fields of history as well.

##### **4.2 Easier to Validate Causal Relations**

Validating a causal relationship could be challenging work for some historians due to the fact that there are many factors and variables that could contribute to that action. However, with comparative history, one could find a parallel from other cases to highlight individual factors that led to a specific result. By that, it is easier to prove the hypothesis of the historian that it could be the case rather than just present it as theory with no concrete example.<sup>29</sup> For example, many scholars found that the turbulent path to democracy of Thailand is unique, and they identified many possible explanations. Only when compared with other countries did scholars see the causal relation between semi-loyal groups of people and the downfall of democracy by the military as one of

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<sup>26</sup> Kocka and Haupt, "Comparison and Beyond," 25-29; Kocka, "Comparison and Beyond," 39-44.

<sup>27</sup> Kocka and Haupt, "Comparison and Beyond," 3.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 3-4.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

the main factors with more than 10 similarities.<sup>30</sup> Thus, a causal relation is validated. It is also able to reflect the general trend of the world of that time by comparison and finding commonality such as the rise of enclosure in England which might also exist in France that reflected the rise of capitalistic agriculture.<sup>31</sup> By validating causal relations, the belief is that if many cases have the same process and result, it should be that the case would produce a similar result. Influenced by stage theory and structuralism, the development pattern will be the same.<sup>32</sup> However, the paradox is that when we observe the comparison closely, we will notice that it has different conditions and factors, although it led to the same result. Hence, the similarity is only partial, not the whole event.<sup>33</sup>

#### **4.3 Unit of Comparison - Suitable for Macro Cases but Emphasizes Smaller Cases as Well**

The question of scale has always posed a challenge to historians as to which scale is the best for their inquiry. In this case, comparative history is a very versatile method of inquiry since historians need only to compare. However, in order to make a comparative history, the unit of comparison must be compatible such as the default scale of nation-state to another nation-state.<sup>34</sup> Still, it is possible to make a comparison between something smaller or larger than a nation-state as long as it is compatible. The unit of comparison could be ranged from an area upholding a religion to another area upholding another religion to as small as a district in a town to another district in a town.<sup>35</sup> One of the most prominent comparative history cases is the Great Divergence which compared Western Europe, especially England, to the Yangtze Delta.<sup>36</sup> For the smaller case, the comparative history of the evolution of the city and its public or housing policy is also possible. From these, we could see that comparative history is especially useful in

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<sup>30</sup> Chai Skulchokchai, "The Same Old Story?: The collapse of the semi-democracy regime in the 1930s Japan and 2006 Thailand," *Asian Review* 35(1), forthcoming.

<sup>31</sup> Kocka and Haupt, "Comparison and Beyond," 3.

<sup>32</sup> Mahoney and Rueschmeyer, "Comparative Historical Analysis," 5; Kocka and Haupt. "Comparison and Beyond," 7.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>34</sup> Heinz-Gerhard Haupt and Jürgen Kocka, "Comparative History: Methods, Aims, Problems," in *Comparison and History: Europe in Cross-National Perspective*, in Deborah Cohen and Maura O'Connor. (New York: Routledge, 2004), 27.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>36</sup> Kenneth Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence: China, Europe, and the Making of the Modern World Economy*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2021).

comparing in a macro case of which the unit of comparison is big. It is still possible to compare a smaller unit, but it is unable to compare to the level of individuals as micro history. Apart from space, time is also crucial for comparative history. From its tradition of investigating the long history, it is commonly used to inquire about an event with a long time span as we can observe from the case of the Great Divergence that covers the 18<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> century. However, it is possible also to investigate a short time span event such as the comparative analysis of the social movement of 1968 in Belgrade and Mexico City.<sup>37</sup>

#### 4.4 Scientific Method as Quantitative

As mentioned above that the comparative method is supposed to be scientific, these scientific methods could be considered as more credible. In other words, being 'scientific' usually means that it is empirical and involves statistics.<sup>38, 39</sup> Although comparative history faces the challenge from the postmodernist and cultural turn that emphasized quality, some of the most famous comparative historical works are still quantitative ones. This includes Seymour Lipset's *Some Social Requisites of Democracy* and Alexander Gerschenkron's *Economic Backwardness in Historical Perspective*.<sup>40, 41</sup> These two works used numerical data extensively in justifying their argument. In the latter years, more emphasis was given to quality, but the aspect of quantity was still not neglected. For example, Pomeranz's *Great Divergence*, apart from the qualitative aspect such as the geographical location of England, still includes quantitative data such as the coal deposits in Western Europe and the gross domestic products of England and China.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Goran Music, "1968 movements in Belgrade and Mexico City : a comparative analysis," (master's thesis, University of Vienna, 2008)

<sup>38</sup> Lorenz, "Comparative Historiography," 27.

<sup>39</sup> Mahoney and Rueschmeyer, "Comparative Historical Analysis," 16-19.

<sup>40</sup> Seymour Martin Lipset, "Some Social Requisites of Democracy: Economic Development and Political Legitimacy," *The American Political Science Review* 44, no. 1 (March 1959): 45-55.

<sup>41</sup> Alexander Gerschenkron, *Economic backwardness in historical perspective: a book of essays*. (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1962).

<sup>42</sup> Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence*.

## 5. Challenges

With its long tradition, comparative history has faced some challenges from time to time from other types of historical traditions. It also has faced direct criticisms from many scholars. In historical studies, there were many “turns” which influenced and undermined the thinking of comparative historians. First of all, postmodernism is one of the movements that emerged in the 1960s popularized by the New Left. It mainly rejected universalism and grand narratives while cherishing pluralism.<sup>43</sup> Secondly, the cultural turn in the 1980s posed a challenge from the realm of experience and symbolic practice which is more of qualitative rather than quantitative.<sup>44</sup> It is true that all of it is a part of postmodernism which emerged in relation to the structuralism that comparative history is trying to form.

### 5.1 Postmodern Turn

Postmodernism emerged as a counterpart to structuralism which emphasized creating a structure or grand theory. Therefore, postmodernism rejected those claims of grand theories and cherished pluralism.<sup>45</sup> Comparative history which emphasized a macro-level of comparison inevitably assumed the homogeneity of the area investigated with the result that they neglected the resistance within society. Accordingly, the false notion of homogeneity emerged. Postmodernism rejects the universal validity of binary opposition. These two arguments are against two of the weak points of comparative history as comparative history focuses on creating a grand theory through comparison or creating a universal claim from their comparison. Earlier works of comparative history usually contained methodological nationalism and a Eurocentric view which views itself as the standard and its counterpart as deviant. As a result, the deviant is the opposite of the standard. Another claim from postmodernism is that it cherishes individuality which means that each object of comparison has its own uniqueness and distinctiveness and,

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<sup>43</sup> Mahoney and Rueschmeyer, “Comparative Historical Analysis,” 22-24.

<sup>44</sup> Chris Lorenz, “‘Won’t You Tell Me, Where Have All the Good Times Gone?’ On the Advantages and Disadvantages of Modernization Theory for History,” *Rethinking History* 10, no. 2 (August 2006): 171-200.

<sup>45</sup> Brian Duignan, “Postmodernism,” accessed March 18, 202, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/postmodernism-philosophy>.

therefore, is incomparable or unable to justify universality from that one perspective investigated by the comparative historian.

## 5.2 Cultural Turn

What is called the cultural turn is a part of the postmodernist movement. The cultural turn emphasizes the role of culture affecting the context and judgement of individuals.<sup>46</sup> The main criticism asserts that comparative history is too structuralist and the politics of society and individuals is too structurally similar to Marxist historiography of base and superstructure.<sup>47</sup> It assumes that everyone will behave rationally, contrary to the belief of historical institutionalism that believed in the fact that outcomes can be different due to flukes and small events.<sup>48</sup> Moreover, by reducing culture and context to a mere constant variable, it became impossible to comprehend the mindset of the individual who took an action.<sup>49</sup> This makes a sharp contrast to microhistory that an individual is the one who projects history. On the other hand, it shows the limitation and the strength of comparative history that it is suitable for macro analysis.

## 6. Disadvantages

### 6.1 Asymmetrical Comparison

One of the biggest challenges for comparative historians is asymmetrical comparison. No matter how historians tried to balance objects of comparison, one object will still be the main object compared to the rest. This is because of the expertise of the historian in that particular field or area and the main area of study. As a result, this is likely to emerge from unconscious bias. From my experience trying to do comparative work, I found myself falling on the same bias since I know one main object of comparison better than the other and had to rely on their secondary sources. Another problem posed by this problem is the “fulfilled prophecies” problem.<sup>50</sup> It is the problem of trying to find the case study that supports their argument. Another case is that the historians already have the

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<sup>46</sup> Mahoney and Rueschmeyer, “Comparative Historical Analysis,” 22-25.

<sup>47</sup> Lorenz, “Won’t you tell me,” 175-178.

<sup>48</sup> Sven Steinmo, Kathleen Thelen, and Frank Longstreth, eds., *Structuring Politics: Historical Institutionalism in Comparative Analysis*, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

<sup>49</sup> Mahoney and Rueschmeyer, “Comparative Historical Analysis,” 13.

<sup>50</sup> Lorenz, “Comparative Historiography,” 25.

conclusion and try to find only examples that support their argument. It was quite common among anthropologists during the colonial era to do comparative work and conclude that the other civilizations are not as advanced as theirs, and therefore should be subjugated by their colonial empire.<sup>51</sup>

## 6.2 Methodological Nationalism

Another problem of comparative historical work is that it could be influenced by methodological nationalism. Methodological nationalism is the belief or bias that one's own nation is unique when compared to others.<sup>52</sup> It is usually done through asymmetrical comparison by giving more space and consideration to their nation with the presupposition that it is unique. Their methodology tends to be biased toward that exceptionalism. The most prominent cases are the "Sonderweg" thesis in Germany and "American Exceptionalism".<sup>53</sup> Scholars of both cases claims that their path to modernity is unique and unlike other countries. However, in fact, those paths appear unique because of the cases that are used in comparison. Many scholars pointed out that those paths are, in reality, not unique at all when compared to other cases. Another probable outcome of methodological nationalism and asymmetrical comparison is that it reproduces the stereotype of people that they are unique. It also reinforces the political self-definition of oneself and one's fellow countrymen that they are the 'chosen' ones.<sup>54</sup>

## 6.3 Language Barrier in Many Cases

Apart from innate bias from the historian, another frequent case is the bias from the secondary literature.<sup>55</sup> The more one studies more cases, the more difficult it is that the historian will be able to master the language used in those cases. As a result, they cannot read the primary sources and must rely on secondary sources.<sup>56</sup> By relying on the secondary source, one's comprehension depends on the author of those secondary sources concerning what they choose and how they would interpret it.<sup>57</sup> It is true that, in certain cases, primary sources are translated into English, but it is just a few. Another

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<sup>51</sup> Philippa Levine, "Is Comparative History Possible?," *History and Theory* 53, no. 3 (October 2014): 338-340.

<sup>52</sup> Steinmetz, "Comparative History and its Critics," 417.

<sup>53</sup> Lorenz, "Comparative Historiography," 34.

<sup>54</sup> Kocka and Haupt, "Comparison and Beyond," 8

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

problem is the 'lost in translation' problem in which the polysemic language is simplified into literal meaning which might give a wrong sense of meaning to the historian.

#### **6.4 Large comparison results in very comprehensive argument**

One contradiction of comparative history is that the more cases one studied, the more comprehensive the argument one will get. This is because the goal of comparative history is to establish a grand theory or generalization through empirical work. Therefore, the larger the number of cases compared, the smaller the conclusion is. The more comprehensive the argument is, the more likely it will be according to one's common sense which could undermine the value of the work.<sup>58, 59</sup> One instance is Lipset's *Some Social Requisites of Democracy* which claims that the more advanced an economy is, the more likely that democracy will be sustained.<sup>60</sup> It compared democracy in 49 countries which reduced its conclusion to a mere sentence of common sense than an in-depth comparative interpretation of the situation of democracy.

#### **6.5 Pulls the studied period out from time and space**

One of the main problems of comparative history is that it pulls out the studied period from time and space.<sup>61</sup> The default belief is that the object of comparison is static when it is actually not.<sup>62</sup> By pulling it out of its context, it cuts out that period of history from the continuity and the flow of the narrative. This could have a tremendous impact on comparative studies since it could give a false impression on the time frame of study. For example, if one frame the time is 1932 to 1936 Japan, the downfall of democracy inevitably came from the insubordination of the military, which situation could be found in many Latin America states.<sup>63</sup> However, if one expanded the timeframe to 1914 to 1936, one would see a better picture that the downfall of democracy in Japan came from a semi-loyal politician who advocated for military intervention, which could be also found in 2006 Thailand.<sup>64</sup> If one looked at it in a greater scale from 1889 to 1936, one would

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<sup>58</sup> Levine, "Is Comparative History Possible?," 340.

<sup>59</sup> Kocka and Haupt, "Comparison and Beyond," 9.

<sup>60</sup> Lipset, "Some Social Requisites of Democracy"

<sup>61</sup> Kocka and Haupt, "Comparison and Beyond," 14.

<sup>62</sup> Steinmetz, "Comparative History and its Critics," 421.

<sup>63</sup> Harukata Takenaka, *Failed democratization in prewar Japan: Breakdown of a Hybrid Regime* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2014).

<sup>64</sup> Skulchokchai, "The Same Old Story"

realize that another probable cause was the inability of the civilian government to maintain control over the military, which led to the rest which is also comparable to 2000s Thailand.<sup>65</sup> Thus, the 1932 to 1936 timeframe cuts out the possibility to see a wider picture and continuity from the narrative. Some events may have roots from before the studied time frame.

### 6.6 Sees No Connections

To add to from the previous point, another criticism from transnational history and *histoire croisee* is that comparative history sees no connections to other places. In many areas, especially Europe, the relation between states is entangled and therefore, the role of transfer is very prominent which gave rise to transfer study. The transfer of ideas is especially important since it created movements such as the Enlightenment or the civil rights and the New Left movement in the 1960s.<sup>66</sup> Such transfers cross borders and neglecting them would result in the impossibility to see the picture properly. The studies will likely fall into methodological nationalism which argues that the event emerged domestically. However, transnational history only works with the areas that have received substantial impressions or influences from other countries which is harder to find outside the West. One of the exceptional cases was the rise of Pan-Asianism that spread throughout Asia after the triumph of Japan over Russia.<sup>67</sup> Consequently, the idea of the Japanese version of "Development" was transferred throughout Asia.<sup>68</sup> As for entangled history, the case is much harder to find in places that are not highly entangled such as Asia. It is true that the Japanese success in their development was very appealing in the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century but its influence toward Siam's model of development during the period of absolute monarchy is almost non-existent despite the role and numbers of the Japanese advisors.<sup>69</sup> Thus, in order to have effective entanglement studies, the place has to be highly globalized or have extensive exchange. Therefore, comparative history is still possible in those areas or pairs where mutual exchange of ideas is not very prominent.

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Kaelble, "Comparative and Transnational History," 19, 21, 23; Lorenz, "Comparative Historiography," 31.

<sup>67</sup> David Michael Malitz, *Japanese-Siamese Relations from the Meiji Restoration to the End of World War II: Relations and Representations*, (Bochum and Freiburg: Projektverlag, 2016), 151.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 154-167

### 6.7 Monocausal trap (Can compare only aspects)

Comparative historians can only choose aspects to be compared.<sup>70</sup> It is impossible to compare all of the aspects of society within two countries. Thus, there is a chance of a monocausal trap by historians since, most of the time, historians study deeply one aspect or dimension of society. The monocausal trap is when the historian concludes the result that the event happened because of one cause and that cause is often the object of studies that are similar in two or more cases studied. This is because historians tend to believe that their field of inquiry is the most important and that the probable cause should lie there. Finding another case that has similar results validates their pseudo-explanation or hypothesis. For example, a comparative historian might argue that the Great Depression was the cause of the collapse of the regimes in Japan and Siam because these two countries were affected deeply by the Great Depression.<sup>71, 72</sup> However, the answer is not that simple. In fact, the Great Depression was just an accelerator to the downfall of those regimes. Japan had its constitutional problem long before that while Thailand had its financial constraint and growing discontent among the urban middle class prior to the Great Depression.<sup>73, 74</sup> By that, historians cannot conclude that one factor causes the change but can only point out the list of factors that contribute to the change and might point out the biggest one. One similarity does not immediately validate the similarity between two events. It needs more than that.

## 7. Conclusion

All in all, we could see that comparative history has a long history, even longer than the term itself. It based its method of inquiry on the method of agreement and method of difference. It influences and was influenced by many disciplines. It was cherished as the more 'scientific' method of inquiry in the field of history. It faces challenges from

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<sup>70</sup> Kocka and Haupt, "Comparison and Beyond," 15

<sup>71</sup> Chris Baker, and Pasuk Phongpaichit, *A History of Thailand*, (Melbourne, Australia: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 105-139.

<sup>72</sup> Andrew Gordon, *A Modern History of Japan: from Tokugawa Times to the Present*, (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2003), 182-186.

<sup>73</sup> Baker and Phongpaichit, *A History of Thailand*, 105-139.

<sup>74</sup> Gordon, *A Modern History of Japan*, 196-204.

other methods of inquiry, mainly the transnational history and *Histoire Croisee* which emphasize circulation. Nevertheless, the objective of the studies of the two abovementioned methods of inquiry and comparative history are different. It has many advantages such as the ability to see peculiarities that stand out from many cases as well as validating causal relations and investigating in many scales of study, from as big as civilization and religion to as small as a village. Nonetheless, it faces many criticisms from the postmodernist that it assumes homogeneity which could blind the historian from seeing uniqueness and resistance. The cultural turn further emphasized the role of ideology and undermined the belief in structuralism that sees everything in according to rational choice. It also has its innate drawbacks such as asymmetrical comparison and methodological nationalism which could result one claiming a peculiarity without carefully studying cases which may result in stereotypes and false consciousness. Comparing more cases leads to a language barrier which could lead one to rely more on secondary sources which means that one might be affected by an author's or interpreter's opinion as well as the 'lost in translation' issue. At the same time, the bigger the case, the more comprehensive the conclusion will be. The Monocausal trap could give a false impression to the historian that their conclusion is the only contributing factor while it actually is not. Lastly, it is criticized by transfer studies scholars that it neglects time and space since it pulls out the event from its context and sees connections between objects of comparison or to its adjacent area. This could lead historians to a wrong conclusion. Nevertheless, comparative history is not static, meaning that it is continuously improved by its scholars. They try to go 'beyond comparison' by incorporating it into other methods of inquiry to get a better picture and to improve it as well as complement other methods of inquiry.

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