

Call for Papers:

*Comparisons going Global? Historical Perspectives on
the Contemporary World*

October 17-19, 2024, Center for Interdisciplinary Research (ZiF), Bielefeld, Germany,

Organizers: Prof. Dr. Eleonora Rohland, Prof. Dr. Antje Flüchter, Prof. Dr. Martin Petzke

Much has been written, debated, and argued about comparison, in particular in the context of (post-)colonial history and -studies. Concepts such as *histoire croisée*, 'connected' or 'entangled history' have been suggested to replace historical comparison, which has righteously been called out as a method for keeping non-Western or non-European societies in the 'waiting room of history' (Chakrabarty, 2000). So, is comparison 'dead'? In the above sense, we surmise, it should be.

However, at Bielefeld University we have been working on a new approach to comparison across several disciplines for the last six years. It's called 'practices of comparing' and focuses on what historical (and contemporary) agents are *actually doing* when they compare. In other words, in a Luhmannian sense, we have shifted to a second-order observer perspective, focusing on how comparison is being 'done' across different epochs and different social, cultural, economic, and political settings, rather than on the first-order perspective of using comparison ourselves as a methodological tool. On the micro-level this can mean looking at how either *comparata* (the compared items) or *tertia* (the reference points with regard to which items were compared) emerged or changed at specific points in time; or, on a more mid-range (meso-) and macro-level, how different communities of practice were using, changing, and/or subverting comparative practices at specific points in time, and, thus, became a motor for historical change.

Research positions emphasize a particular European or Western way of comparing and the habit of comparing constantly. With this conference we would like to bring together researchers from different disciplines, studying different regions of the world in order to answer our primary research question as to whether practices of comparing were different around the globe before the European Expansion and the consequent overpowering of the respective, colonized regions. Did practices of comparing function according to different logics prior to a sustained contact with European civilization? Or, conversely, did they exhibit logics that point to universal or more widespread features of doing comparisons that have so far been regarded as distinctly "Western" or "modern"? And also, have practices of comparing changed again after decolonization, starting in the late eighteenth- and nineteenth centuries in the Americas and after the mid-twentieth century in Asia and Africa? What role have practices of comparing played in the production of knowledge / science and is this a uniquely 'modern' or 'European' phenomenon? (we guess not, but need more examples from around the globe in order to verify or falsify this hypothesis). How were/ are practices of comparing implicated in processes of nation- and/or identity-building, or in the creation of "new world orders"? What role have practices of comparing played for the establishment and spread of

pre-modern and non-Western religions? And finally, how have practices of comparing helped to establish empires throughout historical time (i.e. not only the different European ones but also the case of e.g. the Chinese or Russian Expansion)?

The conference is global in its geographical scope and temporally covers the whole pre-modern era as well as the modern one (i.e. in European historical terms, from the Middle Ages to the mid-twentieth century). We are aware of the fact that the setup of our conference in fact moves us back into a first-order observer and user-position of comparisons. However, we do this with the aim of debunking Eurocentrism even further and are thus seeking expertise from around the globe in order to contribute their perspective, and not to recreate obsolete epistemological categories.

With our approach of practices of comparing, we hope to appeal to a wide array of researchers from all over the world, whether you have actually centrally focused on comparison or not; and we would like to challenge you to engage with the approach so as to produce a tableau of different case studies, geographically and temporally.

If we have sparked your interest, please send an abstract of between 500 and 800 words to sfb1288_management@uni-bielefeld.de by **November 30, 2023**, detailing the role practices of comparing play in your field of expertise. **Elected participants will be notified by December 20, 2023.** Bielefeld University will cover your travel and accommodation expenses to and in Bielefeld. Unfortunately, our overall capacity to accept proposals is somewhat limited by our list of confirmed invited guests.

We are looking forward to your applications!

For more information about Bielefeld University's project on practices of comparing go to:

<https://www.uni-bielefeld.de/sfb/sfb1288/>