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# Building an Essential World History Tool

## Teaching Comparative History

*Robert B. Bain*

"To compare" is a key verb in the history teacher's vocabulary. Comparison may be the most widely used demonstration of higher-level thinking in history courses. Teachers consciously use comparison to make connections, to demonstrate history's value, and to challenge students to analyze events, eras, and people. And even without the verb, comparison hides in teachers' analogies and metaphors. "Any treatment of society or literary tradition," historian Peter Stearns holds, "invites implicit comparisons by encouraging some sense of distinctiveness."[1]

However, implicit comparisons are often poor comparisons. Using little or no comparative methodology, people allow surface similarity or difference to pass for analysis or evidence. Teachers often assume students can compare because everyone makes comparisons so often. Yet frequency of activity does not guarantee the quality.

For example, I recently heard a nationally respected superintendent and leader in educational reform compare special education to the Holocaust. "Special educators are like Nazis. They label children like the Nazis burned numbers into Jewish arms." As a history teacher, I was shocked, immediately struck by the way a superficial, weak link between situations passed for insight. I was also taken by the power of the analogy—the way it silenced the audience, channeled ideas, and narrowed the realm of dissent. Beware the dangers of incomplete comparison, bad analogies, and shoddy history! They are the shadows that cloud minds.

In *Historians' Fallacies*, David Hackett Fisher refers to the misuse of comparison as the fallacy of appositive proof, a "complex form of empirical error, which consists in an attempt to establish the existence of a quality in A by contract with a quality in B—and B is *misrepresented or misunderstood*." This misuse is an "invidious mistake." Though the real attention is on event A, Fisher explains, the "erroneous B is bootlegged" into the discussion of evidence.[2]

How often are history teachers and students guilty of such error? How often do they "bootleg" comparisons into classes? How often do teachers shape the understanding by the type of comparison they allow in their classrooms?

The problem inheres in implied, quick, assumed, or vague comparisons. "The remedy for comparative error," Fisher urges, "is not less comparative history but more of it, more that is explicit and more that is empirical."[3]

This chapter makes a case for teaching comparative history, making it both *explicit* and *systematic*. Why is comparative history valuable for world history students? What are the processes, the habits of mind, that constitute comparative history? This chapter speaks of the educational treasure stored in comparative study. It suggests an overt way to teach the steps in comparison, to reinforce and critique the comparative methods students use. For students and teachers, clarity in the comparative method yields deeper understanding of world history.

### The Value of Comparative History

All the recent calls for improving history in schools make comparative history an element of reform. For example, the Bradley Commission labeled comparison as one of history's unique and most valuable perspectives.[4] World historian Philip Curtin sees comparative history as revitalizing the survey course. Though writing about graduate study, Curtin tells us that "[a] slightly deeper superficial knowledge of world history is not likely to produce much gain in real understanding. The key to understanding is not in the survey, but in the way the parts are linked together, that is, comparative history."[5]

We should take a minute to consider the value of comparative history, if only to justify the time and effort it takes to teach the comparative method. Why is comparison considered so valuable for history students?

*Comparison locates the distinctive.* For students, history is too often one damn thing after another. What makes one historical event significant? What makes one more important than another? Comparative history highlights the distinctive. This allows students to assess what is unique in a situation,

event, idea, or person's life. Through comparison, the distinguishing features step from the background. Locating the distinctive and significant is one of the great values in comparative history.

*Comparison locates the common.* The reverse is also true—comparative history allows students to ask whether or not an event was truly distinctive. How common was a movement, trend, or system? In world history, such comparison allows the constructing of broader world patterns. It encourages students to develop concepts that apply beyond a single locale, nation, or even region. Locating the common is crucial in understanding whether specific attributes of a situation are generalizable to others.

Therefore, comparisons identify the common while attending to the particular. This is the heart that pumps life into world-scale history.

*Comparison locates hidden elements in a situation.* In the short story "Silver Blade," Sherlock Holmes cracks the case by pointing to the key clue—the dog that did not bark. Holmes uncovered the missing evidence—the nonevidence—by comparing what happened with what should have happened if a stranger had appeared. Such comparison, though fanciful, demonstrates the value of holding two situations side by side. Studying a situation in isolation typically encourages historians and students to attend to the most obvious and dramatic elements in the situation. Focusing exclusively on one situation often blinds us to nuance, obscuring subtler characteristics. Applying what is obvious in one situation to another or asking questions raised in one place of another can reveal hidden attributes.

*Comparative history stimulates students to use higher-level thinking skills.* Directly, formally teaching the processes of comparative history should improve thinking skills. Eventually the formal steps of method become habits of thought. Comparative thinking, of course, transcends the historical realm. Most thinking employs implied comparison, analogy, and metaphor. Improving students' comparative facility will sharpen their analytical saw.

## Thinking the Comparative Method

No matter how old students are, we must formally introduce or reintroduce the concept of and steps in making informed comparisons. We must not assume students understand how to "compare and contrast." This is analogous to athletic coaches who begin an initial training session by reviewing or reteaching fundamentals. Baseball's spring training always begins with the basic stances, positions, and movements. Obviously, the time spent in stressing fundamentals depends upon the players, but no coach assumes automatic carryover from the previous season. Neither should history teachers. If it is important enough to build upon, we should review the fundamentals.

In *Dimensions of Learning*, a wonderful book on developing student thinking, the authors suggest four fundamental steps in the comparative process:

1. Select the items you want to compare.
2. Select the characteristics of the items on which you want to base your comparison.
3. Explain how the items are similar and different with respect to the characteristics you selected.
4. Summarize what you have learned.[6]

While these clear, concise steps are a solid foundation, they are too general for effective comparative history. History has unique elements—time and culture—that teachers must include in the comparative process. Further, historians must carefully consider the cases and categories they select for comparison. These factors are elements in teaching the comparative process in history. Therefore, general steps for comparison must be elaborated to reflect the special characteristics of doing comparative history.

The key steps in teaching the comparative process in history are:

1. Introducing comparison and comparative history.
2. Forming a problem and selecting historical cases.
3. Choosing the elements of comparison.
4. Collecting information and analyzing each case.
5. Making an initial comparison.
6. Summarizing the results.
7. Reconsidering each case.
8. Final comparison and conclusions.

### *Introducing Comparison and Comparative History*

Teachers should always introduce or reintroduce the *concept* of comparison and comparative history. From the outset, students must understand that comparison is a particular type of thinking, with its own strengths and weaknesses. The comparative process itself becomes an object of study.[7]

Teachers can vividly begin the study of comparative history by investigating ways people typically make comparisons. One way is to locate examples from advertisements, commercials, or politics. Or student-generated examples might introduce the concept, a technique I often use. Comparison colors much of my students' conversations. In fact, they compare colorfully, contrasting one school to another, one year to another, one class to another, one teacher to another, one film to another, or one musician to another. Often, their comparisons are historical, comparing items in

the past or cases across time. "High school is much harder than middle school." "I can't believe I once liked that song . . . it stinks!" "Nothing ever changes here at school. One year is just like another."

Together, teachers and students analyze the examples to discuss when and why people make comparisons, and to establish the value and power of comparative thinking. The discussion typically centers on what people gain or lose by a comparative method. Students should be able to explain how comparing cases produces different insights from studying cases in isolation. Teachers also could take this opportunity to discuss the problems in quick, loose, or implied comparison.

Another way to introduce the idea of comparison is to have students collect their own examples. Students might maintain a "Comparison Log," keeping a record of examples they've heard or read. Together, teacher and students reflect on how the examples shaped a conversation, argument, or thought. Did the comparison further understanding? Did it make a judgment, holding one case as better or worse than the other? Was it exaggerated? Careful? Fair? Did the comparison clarify or confuse? When is comparison most useful? Does everything need methodological comparison?

While time consuming, such discussion helps students connect new meaning to the verb "compare." Most significantly, the introduction elevates comparison to an object of study and a skill that merits mastery.

### *Forming a Problem and Selecting Historical Cases*

Students should begin their comparison with a clear understanding of their comparative problem or question. They also must identify the type of comparison they will be working with.

There are three general types of historical comparisons: (1) comparing a case across time, (2) comparing across culture or region, and (3) a combination of the two. Each presents unique advantages and dangers.

*Comparison across time.* One comparative problem uses cases drawn from the same region or culture but at different *times* in history. For example, we might compare how people in the west farmed in different eras, developed a relationship with nature, fought each other, or reared children. The historian consciously selects time as the key variable. Cross-temporal comparison enables us to assess the changes within a society, culture, or region over a specific time.

Charles Rosenberg, for example, used this type of comparison effectively in *The Cholera Years.*[8] Rosenberg contrasted how the United States responded to cholera during three different epidemics. His data pointed to new institutions, attitudes, and methods of fighting disease. Placing the three temporal cases side by side dramatically demonstrated the changes.

*Cross-cultural comparison.* The second type compares the same item across cultures or regions within the same era. This allows historians to investigate the cultural commonalities and variations of a phenomenon. For example, one could have compared reactions to cholera epidemics within the same time frame in England, China, Australia, and America.

Peter Stearns, for example, used this type of comparison in *The Industrial Revolution in World History.*[9] He took the same item, industrial growth, and compared it in England, France, Russia, Japan, and throughout the world. This demonstrated important cultural similarities and differences. It expanded our understanding of global industrialism. Too often people indiscriminately apply concepts developed or formulated in one culture to another. Further, people often reify concepts developed in one culture, making them universal without testing them. Cross-cultural comparison reduces these problems.

*Comparing across time and across culture.* This type of comparison is obviously more involved, and teachers should most likely hold these problems for more advanced students. However, the methodology suggested here applies equally to all the categories.

It is crucial to formulate a problem or question—a problem whose solution lies in comparison. What changes? What remains constant? What is distinctive? Does the concept apply equally well everywhere? This problem is the real hook for doing the comparison. Students do *authentic* comparative history when they work to answer the question or resolve the problem.

I begin teaching this process immediately. The agricultural revolution presents a marvelous opportunity to teach the steps in this process. This teacher-guided comparison fully demonstrates the method. The question we study is either the cross-cultural "What is the difference between Paleolithic and Neolithic cultures?" or the cross-temporal "What effect did farming have on people?"

### *Choosing the Elements of Comparison*

After forming the comparative problem, students need to identify the elements of the cases that will guide data collections, and eventually the comparison itself. To answer the larger comparative questions or solve the comparative problem, what must we know about each case? What information will we need about each case to compare?

This important step structures and limits the process—an important yet also potentially dangerous procedure. Without clear categories, the comparative task overwhelms students. They may collect information in a random or an unbalanced

Table 5.1

**Agricultural Revolution Comparison**

| Categories | Paleolithic | Neolithic |
|---|---|---|
| Maintaining order? | | |
| Producing and distributing goods/services? | | |
| Raising young? | | |
| Transmitting traditions, skills, and knowledge? | | |
| Common beliefs? | | |
| Systems of communication? | | |

way. Further, when they try to compare cases, they often find that they do not have sufficient information on comparable items. Comparison then turns into parallel descriptions. So, determining the elements for comparison provides important direction for students.

However, predetermining analytical categories also funnels the data collection and the analysis along a prescribed path. This may restrict student thinking to the most familiar, well-traveled roads. As students decide which elements they will want to compare to resolve their problem or answer their questions, teachers must remind them to leave room for new questions or categories. To ensure such reconsideration, step 7 below, "Reconsidering Each Case," formally revises the categories for comparison.

At this point, teachers might want to set up charts to help students keep their thinking straight. Comparative history lends itself well to concept mapping, charts, and other visuals. One suggestion is to place the comparative cases (either temporal or cultural) in the columns of a chart and put the items of comparison in the rows.

In the agricultural revolution comparison, the students work out five or six elements they will use to analyze and then compare Paleolithic or Neolithic people. Sometimes, I introduce six elements of social life as the categories for comparison: how people maintain order, produce and distribute goods and services, raise young children, transmit their traditions and knowledge and skills; the common beliefs that bind them; and their systems for communication.

A chart then for this lesson could look like Table 5.1.

### *Collecting Information and Analyzing Each Case*

Students now collect data on each cultural or temporal case. They analyze the cases separately, working to acquire information and to understand the specific case. If they create charts, they work to complete the charts, one column (case) at a time.

Students might want to skip the individual data collection stage and move immediately to comparing the cases. Teachers should prevent this, especially with younger students. Initially, these steps should remain separated, as mixing cases too quickly has risks. Comparing before understanding the specifics of the cases often leads students to ignore key elements in one case or apply standards from one case to the other.

In the agricultural revolution lesson, students might work in cooperative groups. Each group would provide information on a case (Paleolithic or Neolithic society). Within the group, students would assume responsibility for gathering information about each category or element of analysis.

### *Making an Initial Comparison*

After students analyze each case, they consider the similarities and differences between the cases. What do these cases have in common? What is different? What is present in one case that is not present in the other? What is missing? If a person from one case traveled to another, what would be most surprising? Least surprising? What if a traveler went in the other direction?

Here students would contrast the way that Paleolithic and Neolithic people kept order, produced and distributed goods and services, raised their young, transmitted traditions, developed common beliefs, and developed systems for communication.

### *Summarizing the Results*

It is important for students to record what they learned from their comparisons. What did they discover? What is similar or different in the cases? This is a wonderful opportunity for students to write in a journal, "publish" a draft of a paper, write a letter explaining the difference from one case to another, or participate in a discussion with other students.

### *Reconsidering Each Case*

Too often, comparison stops with the initial comparison. In history, we must return to each case informed by the ideas and information from the initial comparison. Ask students to reconsider each case now that they have seen the other case.

Ask them to reconsider each case from the perspective of the other. What did they miss the first time? Did the initial questions or categories too narrowly define the study? What elements might we compare that we had not considered initially?

One of the dangers of a generic comparative method is that it presupposes we know from the outset what the effective categories of comparison are. One of the strengths of the comparative method in history is that it questions that assumption. Historians recognize that comparative categories are both time and culture bound. Therefore, they understand that new insights, questions, and categories arise after initial comparison. They review the cases, guided by the new insights, asking new questions, and analyzing with the new categories.

Students should use their initial comparison to add items for analysis. They return to individual cases to gather more information, and they restructure their categories and questions for a deeper comparison.

For example, the initial comparison of Paleolithic and Neolithic societies typically raises questions about changed gender relationships, or relationship to nature, or issues of distribution of goods. Students do not raise these questions initially. The new questions grow from the comparative soil. We then place our new items on the chart, and students return to their investigations of the specific cases to gather information on gender, ecology, or social structure of the Paleolithic and Neolithic societies.

### *Final Comparison and Conclusions*

Students now compare the cases again, reconsidering each category and the new categories or questions. They work to answer their initial question, to resolve their initial problem. As a final step, they analyze the method itself.

This process is initially laborious. The steps are a bit exaggerated, though they do become less rigid with practice. Students can use the method to develop comparative essays or to criticize the comparisons and analogies of others. Most important, the comparative method allows students to make sophisticated connections, to test and retest ideas across times and/or cultures, to deepen and extend their understanding of world history.

## Notes

1. Peter N. Stearns, *Meaning over Memory: Recasting the Teaching of Culture and History* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993), p. 159.
2. David Hackett Fisher, *Historians' Fallacies: Toward a Logic of Historical Thought* (New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1970), pp. 56–58 (emphasis added).
3. Ibid., p. 58.
4. Paul Gagnon and the Bradley Commission on History, eds., *Historical Literacy* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1989).
5. Philip Curtin, "Graduate Teaching in World History," *Journal of World History* 2 (Spring, 1991):82.
6. Robert Marazano et al., *Dimensions of Learning: Teachers Manual* (Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1992), pp. 89–96.
7. Marazano et al. make a similar case for introducing the concept of comparison at the beginning. See *Dimensions of Learning.*
8. Charles Rosenberg, *The Cholera Years: The United States in 1832, 1849 and 1866* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964).
9. Peter N. Stearns, *The Industrial Revolution in World History* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1993).

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