The Past, Present, and Future of Comparative History in East Central Europe and Beyond

Roundtable Discussion, 22 June 2021

Wendy Bracewell
University College London, School of Slavonic and East European Studies, London, Great Britain
w.bracewell@ucl.ac.uk

Ulf Brunnbauer
Leibniz-Institut Regensburg, Regensburg, Germany
ulf.brunnbauer@geschichte.uni-regensburg.de

Diana Mishkova
Center for Advanced Study, Sofia, Bulgaria
mishkova@cas.bg

Joachim von Puttkamer
Imre Kertész Kolleg, Jena
joachim.puttkamer@uni-jena.de

Philipp Ther
Vienna University, Vienna, Austria
Philipp.ther@univie.ac.at

Moderated by Péter Apor (Institute of History, Humanities Research Center, Budapest, Hungary, aporpet@gmail.com), Balázs Trencsényi (Central European University, Vienna/Budapest, Austria/Hungary, trencsenyib@ceu.edu), and Constantin Iordachi (Central European University, Vienna/Budapest, Austria/Hungary, iordachic@ceu.edu)¹

¹ Constantin Iordachi was involved in the preparation of the roundtable and the formulation of questions but due to an unforeseeable family emergency could not take part in the discussion.
Balázs Trencsényi: Our roundtable was occasioned by the publication of the anthology on the history of comparative and transnational history in East Central Europe and beyond. Rather than organizing a conventional book launch, we preferred to engage in a dialogue with a group of esteemed colleagues and very important intellectual voices in and on comparative history-writing during the last decades. We asked them to share with us their ideas about the field of comparative history in general and the fortunes of the East Central European region – broadly conceived and very fuzzily conceptualized – as a unit of analysis in comparative and transnational history in particular. Our invitees stem from different academic and disciplinary cultures, but they have known each other and their work resonates. They represent not only history but also some of the adjacent or friendly scientific or disciplinary traditions such as anthropology or historical sociology. As they all lead important research institutions in the field, we are also curious to hear their insights about how their institutions are coping with the thematic and financial questions concerning what is worth pursuing as a research topic in the twenty-first century.

I would like to add that this conversation was organized by Pasts, Inc. Center for Historical Studies at Central European University, launched almost two decades ago by Sorin Antohi. Over the years, Pasts, Inc. has been involved in many activities connected to comparative and transnational history, not the least the very project which gave birth to this anthology.

Péter Apor: The project actually originated quite a long time ago, in 2006. It had three important objectives and three important components in three different areas: one in education, a second one in research, and the third one, which we may call a civic mission.

First, the project sought to foster education in comparative history at Central and Eastern European universities. Our intention was to encourage teachers, colleagues, and also students to engage in teaching on the comparative history of the region and Europe in a broader sense. The project sought to aid in the development of courses and the sharing of teaching materials in comparative history, and furthered exchange between students and professors.

Second, the project sought to foster research in more comparative terms. Projects on Central and Eastern Europe were encouraged which could have itself. We are also grateful to Ágoston Berecz who helped with the organization and recording of the discussion.

accounted for the transnational frames of regional history better. Our project catalyzed research on cross-border entanglements and developmental patterns of the region through comparison of various national or regional cases.

Third, as we were also convinced that the comparative and transnational perspectives were important vehicles to deconstruct national isolationism and particularism, this project had a strong civic ambition or component from the very beginning. Engaging in debate and establishing the right of disagreement among various national narratives would be very important for enhancing the capacity for dialogue in the region and for opening the history of the region toward more nuanced and empirically grounded discussions in a broader European framework.

The project itself was supported by the Higher Education Support Program of the Open Society Institute and the Central European University. We cooperated with numerous universities and institutions in the region such as the University of Chișinău, the University of Tbilisi, and the Centre for Advanced Study in Sofia. The structure of the project comprised a series of workshops and conferences at various universities across the region.

Let us now turn to the roundtable. The first set of questions addresses the state of the art in comparative history and historiographies. How would you assess the state of the art in comparative studies in Eastern Europe and comparison’s general usefulness for research? What is the relevance of earlier canons of comparative history in current methodological discussions?

Balázs Trencsényi: Elaborating on the questions, let me point out a certain irony here. After 1989, Central European historians were encouraged (often by their Western peers) to transcend national history toward regional comparative history. And by the time there emerged a cohort of scholars who learned each other’s languages – which previous generations rarely did – and became well-versed in the regional context, they were told (often by the same Western peers) that comparison is irrelevant and parochial because now global history is the cutting-edge approach. This often led to the swift re-marginalization of East Central Europe as it was not considered part of the Western canon nor was it part of the Global South.

Taking this into account, we also wanted to ask you about the relationship between regional comparative history and global history. Are they really competitors or even “adversaries”? Do you see possibilities for cooperation? Let us remember that entangled history and comparative history have often been presented as incompatible traditions. But historically, there is interplay between them: the book we edited is full of texts where these approaches intermingle. How do you see this problem and how does it relate to different comparative methodologies? We tend to focus on comparative history, but of
course, comparative history was a latecomer compared to other comparative methodological traditions be it literary studies, comparative linguistics or the comparative sociology, which had a huge impact on comparative history. So how can we valorize this multifaceted comparative methodological tradition in this new methodological configuration?

Ulf Brunnbauer: It’s a bit intimidating to comment on comparative history when the discussion is taking place on the occasion of a book that collects all these big names in comparative history and when some of the leading practitioners of comparative history are in the audience, an identity I would not claim for myself. Neither did I actually ever systematically think about comparative history. So, this was a good occasion to do a little bit of homework while preparing for this panel. To start with, the first question that you posed to all of us: how do you assess the state of art in comparative studies of Eastern Europe? I guess we don't talk about political science or economics, which are inherently more comparative than history. For that reason, I would not dare to make a general assessment because the bodies of scholarship coming out in many countries have become too extensive for anyone to possibly have a full, comprehensive view.

But from my modest experience, I dare say that a little bit more comparative history would not hurt. I'm the editor or a co-editor of three book series, and I did some statistics in preparing for the panel. For one of the series, *Südosteuropäische Arbeiten*, which publishes mainly monographs on Southeast European history, we edited twenty volumes in the last decade, which is quite a few, I think, for a small field. And exactly one of them was comparative – comparing certain phenomena in Serbia and in Croatia. I am also the co-editor of a book series of our Graduate School for East and Southeast-European Studies, which publishes mainly books coming out of dissertations. And obviously a dissertation in history is not the genre most prone to comparison. Out of the twenty volumes we have published so far, two were comparative. Together with Philipp and other colleagues, I am one of the editors of a book series on social and economic history of East Central Europe; and as we know, social and economic history played an important role in the emergence of comparative history. Out of the twenty or so volumes we’ve edited so far, three were really comparative, which I think is quite telling. What is even more telling, and maybe that’s the point that I should stress, is that all those comparisons were within the region. It’s excellent research, obviously, but the little comparative history that exists on (and in) the region seems to be limited to comparisons between different countries in Eastern and Southeastern Europe and very often within a certain epoch. I didn't see, at least in the books for which I share responsibility as editor, much in terms of diachronic or cross-regional comparison. I
think this does limit our understanding of the region. Why not compare the steel sector – and this was one of the comparative books that we’ve edited – in Albania and Vietnam, for example? You might actually find out more from this comparison than by comparing Albania with other state socialist countries. I think the urge to Europeanize Southeast and East European history and, in a way, also to normalize its history within a European context has really hindered our imagination when comparing the socialist developmental state.

Péter Apor alluded to this urge to better understand different developmental patterns in Eastern Europe through comparison. I think we would learn much more from comparing the European socialist state with, for example, Southeast Asian variants of the developmental state; we would learn more about the peculiarities of state socialism and also what was not so particular about it. And this sort of cross-regional comparison, I think, would attribute more and new significance to our region when we think about big themes like development or modernity. Just to mention one example – and to promote our institute a little – what we’re doing in Regensburg: Adrian Grama, whom many of you know, is currently pursuing a project comparing labor relations and labor legislation in Romania under communism and in Portugal under Salazar. He really found striking parallels and similarities which help us to think about a new geography of Southeastern European history as part of Europe’s South, at least in the twentieth century. This is, I believe, a very different, but very productive framework to rethink Southeastern Europe and some of the most important problems shaping its modern history.

By taking a case – it does not need to be a state or a society but we could think of any scale – from “our” region and comparing it with something on a different continent, these kinds of somewhat counter-intuitive comparisons would also really help us reflect on what we mean when we say “similar” or “different.” Because this was an issue that came up in my mind when I did a little bit of reading for today from these high priests of comparative history. What they all say, and this is certainly true, is that comparative history is necessary for us to actually know what is general, what is similar, and what is dissimilar in the things that we are interested in. But they never say what “similar” or “different” means. I mean, these are very relational categories, and depending on your scale of perspective, things that for us Central-Europeanists look very different might look very similar in the eyes of a specialist for another world region. Certainly we would claim that state socialism in Hungary and state socialism in Romania were two completely, ontologically different things; but if you look at these things from a different geographical perspective, you might come up with a completely different sense of what the geography of difference and similarity is. For that, we do need comparative history.
Wendy Bracewell: I think that the point about numbers and the scope of comparative history that’s been done over the last few years is a really fair one. But a different way of looking at the problem might be to say, well, the proof of the pudding is in how good it tastes. And I’ve been really impressed and inspired by a lot of work that’s come out from our region, working particularly on comparative and transnational history and taking both of those approaches seriously. I think that the books that I read most recently was the one by Gaëlle Fisher on “resettlers and survivors,” about Germans and German-speaking Jews from Bukovina after the Second World War, who built up a Bukovina of memory out of their experiences. And she does a wonderful job comparing the approaches and attitudes of these people in West Germany and in Israel. So that is a very systematic comparison, but it also looks at the way in which these two different groups were entangled with one another, the way their views influenced one another. And she does a fabulous job of showing us why this story can’t be told on a separate national basis. It must be told as an entangled history, but it also needs to be approached comparatively. And that’s the sort of work that I think will inspire others to pick up these approaches and try them out. It’s not just the methodological discussions, inspiring as they are, but the ways in which people put such methods into use that show the virtues and possibilities of comparative and transnational approaches. Another thing that we need to bear in mind when considering the constraints on doing comparative history is how people starting out with PhDs see themselves as operating on the job market. It would be good to see more dissertations that used comparators from very different circumstances. But I think there’s been a general tendency to advise our students to avoid that because then how do they pitch themselves when they come onto the job market? Do they fall between two stools? You very rarely see comparative history as a job specification that would welcome the sort of research involving cross-regional comparison of the sort that Ulf urges. What you usually see is German history, French history, in short, positions in history defined in terms of the traditional nation-state. In terms of comparative approaches, people working on Eastern Europe tend to have an advantage on the job market because we can take for granted mastery of two or more regions within Eastern Europe and do so without appearing suspicious or superficial to a search committee that might ordinarily look for a much more specific specialism. This means that people starting out in our field have the potential to be more innovative and more experimental and, since we are talking about the state of the art, to push the state of the art further while still having a decent expectation of finding a job.

Joachim von Puttkamer: Thank you also for the invitation and congratulations on the book. It has an explicitly political mission in showing that the impulse to
do comparative history did not simply come from the West but also originated from within what we call the “region.” Yet, I’m afraid that looking back at the past one or two decades, comparative history as a general approach is rather on the decline. More wouldn’t hurt, as Ulf said, and I couldn’t agree more. But I would like to focus a bit more on the broader context and on why we do comparative history in the first place because I think Ulf is quite right in highlighting the broader impulse to do European history and to compare within Europe. Much of what we did in embarking on comparative history was to put Eastern Europe on the map of European history and to take this as a starting point to challenge national perspectives, as Péter Apor just mentioned. Twenty years ago or so, the Zentrum für vergleichende Geschichte Europas was established in Berlin. Philipp, you worked there with precisely this intention. Since then, the methodological reference points do not seem to have changed much. And even though there are excellent new books also on the market, and Wendy just mentioned one, I don’t have the impression that their intention is to develop the theoretical framework for doing comparative history. They simply do it. But the method itself has not really developed any further, I would say.

What I would call a relative decline in comparative history went together with the rise of global history. In current debates during the past decade, the global perspective has become the main challenge to the national one. The global perspective can focus much more easily on entanglements, on other regions as Ulf said, and which has a much sexier political agenda than working toward a common European perspective and thinking in terms of European regions. One of the main challenges to comparative history in this context comes from postcolonial approaches, which in various fields I see expanding or addressing Eastern Europe as well. Postcolonial approaches are based on implicit comparison, as if the situation in Poland’s eastern territories or in Habsburg-occupied Bosnia was quite similar or very similar to a colonial, imperial, and postcolonial setting, to give just two examples. Starting from there, one can come to very inspiring questions. But one can also get it utterly wrong. And postcolonial approaches don’t really deconstruct the national frame; rather the contrary. In my perception, this postcolonial approach is much more on the rise than comparative history. This is something we should tackle and address, making the best of it and trying to fend off what’s problematic about it because quite often, it comes at the expense of historical precision and judgement.

Diana Mishkova: As a start, and trying to address directly the questions the editors of this wonderful volume put forward, I would like to reflect on the usefulness of the pre-existent canons of comparative and transnational history. We can then continue by reflecting on how comparative and transnational
history play out in relationship to global history. What I’m going to say in response to the first question is, of course, informed by my dealings with the traditions of comparative and transnational history in Southeastern Europe. And I think that there are several features of the history of historical research in Southeastern Europe that are important for our discussion. It seems worthwhile to be reminded of these.

First is the fact that comparative and transnational or entangled history are indeed not imports from the West but have proper, although not necessarily continuous traditions in this region. Some strains of these traditions, as a matter of fact, explicitly sought to confront and emasculate certain geopolitically or culturally embedded Western supranational schemes and spoke on behalf of emancipatory agendas.

Second, for regional practitioners, comparative and transnational approaches were not antithetical but complementary and interlocking. Indeed, they believed that units of comparison are made via interaction with other units.

Third, these two approaches had always been understood as inherently multidisciplinary, combining procedures of the humanities and the social sciences. Consequently, regionally oriented historiography in Eastern Europe was strongly influenced by the work of non-historians, especially linguists, ethnographers, anthropo-geographers, as well as Byzantinists and Ottomanists, especially art and architectural historians and literary scholars.

Finally, the advocates of comparative and transnational history saw their enterprise as a collective endeavor, one involving close intellectual collaboration across national borders.

These are not my extrapolations or deductions from some dispersed reflections; they are the methodological bases, elaborated in the form of programmatic manifestoes, of what came to be dubbed “Balkanology” in the 1930s. In a way, I can see a lot of these features surfacing in the volume that has brought us together today for a discussion. And while some of these features of the pre-existent traditions of comparative and transnational research in the region have been explicated in the introduction, others are addressed in a more implicit way. What Wendy mentioned as impressive in the recent study she referred to, namely the impossibility of looking at these national cultures or traditions separately from each other and the combination of entanglement and comparison, was actually something that featured explicitly on the agenda of regional Balkanologists already in the course of the 1930s. The kind of comparative and transnational research that these scholars advocated at the time rested on two basic premises. One was the existence of overlapping historical legacies, ancient, Byzantine, Ottoman, and later on Communist, which led to
the creation of what the Croatian philosopher Vladimir Dvorniković called “common civilizational habitus,” i.e., common traits or regional specificity. The advocacy of comparison as the method of proper historical explanation, on the other hand, led some historians to transcend the confines of Southeastern Europe and call for a cross-regional comparison of the Balkans with the Iberian peninsula. The second premise was long-term coexistence, which had resulted in continuous exchanges and connexions – which at the time was called “mutual influences”; today, we would probably call it transfer history.

I’m not going to discuss the post-World War II part of the story. I would only say that in many ways there was a discontinuation – in practical if not necessarily normative terms – of the prewar traditions and a reversion to a heavily politicized and nation-centred perspective. With hindsight, it looks like the 1990s and the early 2000s were an interlude when a certain drive toward transnational and comparative history became visible, especially among a younger, internationally mobile generation of historians. At present, we can see the resurgence of radicalized political nationalist projects in the region and the renationalization of both the public and the academic sphere. So I think that it is as urgent today as it was in the 1930s that we, as historians, come up with a response to this. I hope that we can address these issues later in our discussion.

Philipp Ther: First of all, I would like to express my gratitude that this volume has been published. One of the perennial problems I have had in teaching comparative history was that I had to rely on texts that were published after the turn of the millennium, like the Berghahn volume on comparative and transnational history published by Jürgen Kocka and Heinz Gerhard Haupt. So, I am really glad that there is something new out that can serve as a reader and which also has a deep historical dimension. One of the issues we could reflect on is not an objectivized scientific comparison but on how various social groups, among them scientists and historians, used to compare themselves, their social environment, their political context and countries in past periods. This is a call to historicize comparisons and what that means as a cognitive maneuver. Major paradigms of East-Central European history have come out of this practice of comparing oneself, e.g., the paradigm of backwardness. Comparing oneself also had huge political and social ramifications such as catch-up modernization.

Anyway, it’s good that this volume is out, and I am looking forward to the ongoing series. It is evidence of the productivity of the Budapest School. Now this is not a school in the old sense, with one or two towering figures and a hierarchical order. It is rather a collective effort, of course guided by some key actors such as Balázs. I think it’s really great what you’re doing and what you
have achieved over the years. It is all the more important since the Bielefeld School in Germany, which used to be the main promoter of comparative history starting in the 1980s, does not exist anymore. Jürgen Kocka, Hartmut Kaelble, Hannes Siegrist (not all of them can be directly associated with the Bielefeld School, and yet, there was a close connection) have retired. The generation educated by the foundational generation is still around and in fact quite successful, but it is more dispersed and has followed different research tracks. Hence, the Budapest School (we might have to rename it because of CEU’s removal, but I use this term independent of its actual physical location) is in certain ways filling a void. By the way, I don’t fully agree that there is a decline of comparative history, Joachim, but certainly there is no longer a common identity and locus of comparative history in Germany. The same is true for the study of cultural transfers in France.

Does that imply that there is methodological stagnation? The debate about comparative history, cultural transfer, and entangled history was indeed more lively around fifteen or twenty years ago. I participated in that debate, and I thought then it would be more productive (at least for me) to practice comparative history and other relational approaches instead of telling other people how to do it. I also got a little tired of this very German Überbau debate. But that does not mean that these theoretical debates are superfluous. Every generation of historians should discuss whether and how it chooses to do comparative, transfer, and entangled history. There’s so much room for new projects, and it also is much easier to do comparisons in the age of the internet. I think that will keep the field alive, so I am more optimistic than Joachim in that regard. One can work on small or large scales, do entangled comparisons where the cases are intertwined, or do sequential comparisons, by which I mean combining the study of different periods of time like e.g., transformations after 1918 and after 1989.

I’ve tested all this in the past twenty years. What kept my interest alive was seemingly simple research questions. I would like to mention one example here because it took me away from my main geographical area of expertise, Central and Eastern Europe. For quite a while, I studied the transformation of Poland after 1989 and how Polish shock therapy was turned into a major neoliberal success story. I wanted to learn about the feedback effects on international financial organizations, and so I went to the World Bank archive where I found an earlier neoliberal success story, Chile. Later on, I studied the end of radical neoliberalism during the global financial crisis of 2008/2009, and again compared two regions rarely put together: East Central Europe and Southern Europe. Of course, these are very recent topics of history, and one could and should also choose earlier periods. The secondary literature and many digitized
sources are much more easily accessible on the internet than in the old days when the Bielefeld School carried out large scale comparative projects. That will keep the field alive and attractive for many years to come. More comparative history might also help bring about a paradigm shift in the questions historians are asking. Since the cultural turn, the main focus has been on the how question. That ran counter to the main questions comparative historians and social scientists used to ask. At the moment, the why questions have gained new relevance. One of the why questions recently asked by CEU-colleagues is the backlash against the values of the revolutions in 1989. I think this is a very relevant question.

Obviously, we should not pose the why questions like they were asked in the 1970s and 1980s. Comparisons should be made more dynamic by not only studying commonalities and differences but convergence and divergence. And obviously we should take into account the productive side of the cultural turn, which also means being aware of the highly constructed character of comparisons. Another impulse might be to encourage comparisons without a “home base.” By this I mean that in the old days, most comparative historians used to compare their home country or region with a second area of study. That also made sense for building a career because then people could apply for jobs in national and in international history. This was fine, but now with the rise of global history, there are many more job possibilities, and the aforementioned technical requirements allow us to compare distant and different cases. I would like to point out an example from my new institute, where Agata Zysiak is comparing the de-industrialization of Łódź and Detroit. However, she is a historical sociologist. Maybe the grand picture of comparative studies looks better if you take into account historical sociology, which I still perceive as the main inspiration.

My last point relates to what Joachim said about the competition out there. I would say there are some tensions between cultural and comparative history, but these can be resolved or combined in a particularly interesting way. A main competitor, at least for public attention, is postcolonial and global history, that is especially true for our region, East Central Europe. The very idea of postcolonial studies, as the concept was originally devised by Edward Said, has occidentalist origins. Later on, the concept was applied for Russian history (Alfred Rieber co-organized a conference pioneering that, which I would like to mention this on the occasion of his ninetieth birthday), and then some colleagues in Budapest and Vienna, Moritz Csáky needs to be mentioned here, utilized the concept for Central Europe. Nevertheless, East Central European history got caught between a rock and a hard place because it does not have much if any colonial history at all but at the same time was perceived as too European.
to qualify for global history. Maybe that awkward position can be improved by the attempt to go global by studying the connections between East Central European and global history, although that looks a little like attempting a catch-up development. I think what we should continue to stress is the importance of keeping up the standards of language. We should demand to do global history not only in English, Spanish, or whatever imperial language but to do it on the basis of Swahili, Bengali, Vietnamese, and whatever language you have in the place you are studying. We should also maintain the distinction between race and nationalism, racism and nationalism, and the terms imperial and colonial. They are mingled too often. We should contribute to the postcolonial debate by showing that not all of Europe has a colonial past and listen to historians from Slovakia and Ukraine who stress the distinction between colonial and imperial. With that distinction in mind, we also can contribute substantially to global history, which should not be reduced to the postcolonial paradigm either. Turkey, Thailand, and many other countries had a very different past. They should be studied and compared in their own right.

As for the relationship of global and East Central European history, we can refer to the inspiration provided by Stanisław Szczepanowski and *Nędza galicyjska*. His book was an early attempt at a global social-historical comparison. He wrote it in the late nineteenth century because he was conscious that his home region might be more similar to the Italian South, Africa (which was mentioned in the chat), or Bengal.

**Péter Apor:** Turning from the past to the future of the discipline, another important topic we would like to address concerns the relationship of digital humanities to comparative research. How do you see the impact of digital humanities on comparative research? To what extent would you consider it as hindering or, alternatively, fostering comparative history or comparative practices in general?

**Ulf Brunnbauer:** I find the question of digital humanities very important for the historical moment we are in; but it also pertains to the question of how comparative history relates to entangled history or global history – which in brackets I always found to be a little bit of an artificial controversy. Naive as I am, I always thought – but maybe I’m too much of a historical sociologist, still too much shaped by early readings from my student days – that good global history should also be comparative and vice versa, and that transnational processes can only be understood if we look at the different manifestations of all these things at different locales. I think the crucial question here is the one that you posed: the impact of digital methods on the humanities. I think that’s
really one of the big questions. This raises some really important epistemo-
logical questions, but also political questions as far as the policies of funding
institutions are concerned, and it also relates to the question of comparative
versus (or not) transnational history. There’s an excellent essay I really recom-
mend reading, by Lara Putnam on the “Transnational and the Text-Searchable:
Digitized Sources and the Shadows They Cast,” which appeared in the American
Historical Review in 2016. Let me just quote a little bit from this text, which I really
found eye-opening. She writes: “The transnational turn is accelerating simul-
taneously with the digital turn. And it is no coincidence.” – By the way, I think
the digital turn is what we should talk about, not the cultural turn anymore –
“Source digitization has transformed historians’ practice in ways that facilitate
border-crossing research in particular. . . . Technology has exploded the scope
and speed of discovery. But our ability to read accurately the sources we find,
and evaluate their significance, cannot magically accelerate apace.” And then
she also stresses that we risk overemphasizing the importance of that which
connects and underestimate the weight of that which is connected, for exam-
ple, social structure. I think this is a very important point because, obviously,
digital humanities and digital technologies, the amount of data being digitized
and also processed and being made accessible from basically everywhere –
although this everywhere is also not everywhere because it still depends on
having a high-speed internet connection which is also not a given everywhere –
I think it opens up new vistas for comparative and transnational history. And
the potentialities are rich, but so too are the risks. I think the risks of digital
technologies in our discipline of history are maybe not fully understood. By the
way, we talk about digital humanities, but we tend to forget that actually a very
strong tradition of comparative history comes out of a kind of social history
that used big data, when nobody has yet spoken of digital humanities. I think
especially of the Cambridge Group for the History of Population and Social
Structure; this was really very important comparative research, but it was also
research that was very context-sensitive.

I think this is really the point here. I mean, if we use this data without
reflecting on them, we tend to find things for which we never searched, and we
tend maybe to get excited about connections which actually might not have
mattered much; and we also design research based on choices made by those
who, first of all, gathered and then also made accessible these data. What we
do risk is one of the main contributions that history and humanities in general
can make to a better understanding of the world, and Philipp already men-
tioned that: which is the knowledge of context, the sensitivity to local contexts,
the sensitivity to the importance of place for the phenomena we are interested
in, also the sensitivity for the fact that there are other languages than English
in this world, and that digitization obviously strengthens this bias in terms of which languages are accessible or findable, that is, made findable through means of digital humanities. I think here comparative history really has an important role to play, but so do Area Studies, which I want to throw into our discussion because they also stress the importance of place and the importance of embedded social structures. If you want to understand the empirical puzzle of why in a world in which everything seems to be connected, everything still seems to be so different, then we need to have this kind of very context-sensitive research that is able to work with and dig out local knowledge that has been produced in these places, which very often is stored in sources that you would not find from digitized information.

This is, I think, one of the crucial questions. And the last point in this regard, and this is one of the risks that I see because we all are so excited about digital humanities, although probably very few of us actually understand what's going on. And I am not the least technologically enlightened person, but a lot of it I just don't understand very often. I don't always see the analytical value of these nice graphs and data visualizations, but I think it will influence funding decisions. So with the belief of funding agencies that at some point in time all the relevant knowledge of this world will be accessible through digital means we, and especially the generations to come, will find it ever more difficult to actually justify the need for long-term fieldwork and the need to work in archives, to find things that you would never have thought you would find, which you certainly will never find using digital methods only. This is something that we really need to be aware of, and comparative history really has to make an important case in this regard.

Philipp Ther: I wanted to tell about my experience at the IMF and the World Bank in Washington. The IMF basically said you don't need to enter the archive. We have everything online. The final excuse was that their research premises are very small and that I asked too late to get a place in the archive. The archive of the World Bank also declared initially that they have a lot of stuff online, but they allowed access. Then, in the real archive, I found many more materials than the digitized ones, above all very interesting country reports. These materials also contained copies of materials from the IMF which had not been put online and which were, again, very revealing. Hence, this little episode can tell us that the digitization of archival materials makes initial research a lot easier, especially with media sources like the New York Times or Anno, where all major Austrian newspapers are accessible. Digitization offers many opportunities in teaching comparative history, encouraging students to do small-scale comparative projects. Overall, it is a great opportunity. But I also see the danger
that students will soon read only digitized materials and not work in the real
archive or with real newspapers anymore. There is a danger that the digitiza-
tion reduces contextual and deep knowledge. Nevertheless, the chances pre-
vail, and it is much easier to compare nowadays.

**Wendy Bracewell:** Could I pick up on the digital point just briefly? It’s hard to
deny that improved access is wonderful, but I think there is a problem that is
sometimes a little bit obscured. We tend to talk about the digital archive. But in
fact, as compared to the actual archives that we are familiar with, the problem
with the digital archive is that it’s not often clear how it was put together. It
obscribes and hides its “archiveness.” What selection criteria went into creat-
ing this digital archive? What is arbitrary and what isn’t? What’s included and
what isn’t? Sometimes you can make a guess about it. But the way that digiti-
zation projects often work is to imply that this data set is a) complete and b)
neutral. And we know that’s not the case with our paper archives. So, I think we
need to be much more careful about the source criticism that we apply to the
digital archive. Access, great. Arbitrariness, maybe not so much.

**Joachim von Puttkamer:** This is a great point, and I couldn’t agree more. But
our discussion shows that we are not quite clear on what we talk about when
we speak about digital history. Accessibility, of course, is wonderful. And with-
out the digitized materials of the Open Society Archives, I would have been
lost last year in what I’m currently doing. But what I see being discussed in
terms of digital history is rather going in different directions. There’s a pressure
toward research data management, which is going to be a great nuisance for
many of us because we’re used to having this being done by the archives and
libraries, and we have established standards of source editing.

Then, there is a pressure to see digital history as a method in terms of big
data and connections being made. And I don’t really see very many genuinely
historical projects even going in that direction. As yet, there is also not much
pressure from funding institutions to do so, at least not from German ones.
Most of the applications I get to see are fairly conventional in this respect.
They rely on reading texts and trying to find something unexpected there in
a classical hermeneutic approach. As Wendy just said and as it has been said
earlier, one of the great challenges both to digital and to comparative history,
if you really take it seriously and not just simply take inspirations from similar
or somehow related cases but try to do a well-thought-through comparison,
is to keep the historical context in mind. When I’m teaching various topics in
a comparative approach, students quickly get lost. For them, having to think
their way into Polish history is a challenge in itself, and balancing Hungarian or Czech history on a similar level at the same time is asking a lot.

Keeping different contexts in mind while doing a well-thought-out comparative project is also quite difficult in terms of the narration, both for comparative projects and for digital history. Particularly in cultural history, we are trying to craft a good story from what we find. In well thought-through comparative projects, narrating the argument, crafting a story is a challenge unless we simply set one national case next to the other. Not that it cannot be done, but it’s a challenge. How to tell a good story is also an aspect that digital history has not really addressed yet in methodical terms. This might easily get us back to the nineteenth century debate about whether history can keep pace with the natural sciences. But accessibility, of course, is great.

Diana Mishkova: I want to raise one question, which to me is still an open one. Namely, to what extent, if at all, have global approaches, especially in the context of digital humanities, eliminated or at least diminished the inherent asymmetries between “big” and “small” (“central” and “peripheral”) historical cultures. To me, this is an important question. Scholars coming from countries with colonial traditions could legitimately “package” their colonial experience as transnational or global history while sitting in their National Archives. The (post)imperial experiences of East Central Europe can neither be grasped by using a single corpus of national sources – hence the need for regional historians to master several “minor” languages next to the “main” ones – nor could this kind of history hope to reach out beyond a readership with “local knowledge.” The ironic aspect of this is that many of these historians see transnational regional history as a vehicle for integrating the national into the global.

And here we come back to the “challenge” of global history to national history. I believe that, as far as East Central Europe is concerned, a viable case could be made for comparing or linking two distant national histories, short of enhancing the national framework, only if we take regional contexts into account. How much do we gain from comparing Albania to Vietnam or Romania to Portugal, as Ulf rightly advocates, if we focus simply on “bilateral” similarities and differences? Here I would recall sociologist Michael Mann saying that very little that is transnational is global and that most influences that transcend national borders emanate not from the globe but the neighborhood. Put another way, de-provincializing the experience of the East Central European countries necessarily involve comparisons and linkages that take the regional parameters of this experience seriously.
The actual problem I see is of different nature, though. Joachim already alluded to it. Namely that the global perspective to Eastern/East Central Europe usually comes wrapped in postcolonial packaging, “reproducing” the mainstream intellectual trends that circulate in the Western “core(s).” It would be only a slight exaggeration to say that today the postcolonial approach is considered to be the legitimate transnational or global approach to East (Central) European history. Despite the (to me at least) obvious “flattening” effect of this imposing paradigm, which – as is often the case with ideologically-anchored frameworks – often conceals more than it reveals, this dominance is to a large extent the result of the above-noted asymmetry. As Balázs Trencsényi rightly noted on another occasion, for many East European scholars, appropriating the category of postcolonialism remained the only way to validate their local competence in a globally relevant interpretative framework.