

Introduction: Doing and Undoing Comparisons in the Americas from the Colonial Times to the Present

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Currently, comparisons seem to be ubiquitous. Anything and anyone – be it universities, sports teams, countries, restaurants, or physicians – can and seem to be compared in order to identify, for example, the ‘best,’ ‘performance’ or the most ‘diversity.’[1] Nevertheless, comparing is hardly a novel phenomenon. Critics maintain that ‘modernity’ (and in particular the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries) gave rise to new ways of seeing, measuring and ordering the world as well as to new practices of comparing; and that during that same period, comparing was increasingly established as a seemingly objective and scientific method, a fact that led to the establishment of a number of academic areas and (sub-) disciplines such as comparative literature.[2]

It is a well-established notion within academia that juxtapositions and comparisons have played a central role in the creation of geopolitical imaginaries with regard to the Americas – be they Eurocentric or Creolist – and that they have fueled images, clichés, and stereotypes about various region(s) and their peoples. It similarly holds true for the making and remaking of the north-south divide within the Americas, whether real or imagined, in regard to relations between countries, regions and on a hemispheric scale.[3]

However, in the course of the twentieth century, for example, with the rise of postcolonial and decolonial studies, critics increasingly explored and criticized not only the seemingly ‘objective’ comparative disciplines within academia but also the practice of comparing itself. Postcolonial and anti-colonial intellectuals criticized European perspectives, the standards involved in the practices of comparing, and their being influenced by assumptions, prejudices, and biases. Comparisons and practices of comparing were rejected for creating hierarchies between presumably ‘more’ and ‘less’

developed countries, races, or cultures. In this context, comparing as globalized practice was perceived as practice of modern dominance, a tool of power, which perpetuates relations of hegemony and subordination, center and periphery, sameness and difference. In a similar vein, *tertia*, the aspects, which are compared (as, e.g., ‘progress’), were revealed to be not ‘given’, but as always being constructed and led by particular interests and ideologies.[4]

Despite or perhaps due to the aforementioned issues, scholars such as Angelika Epple and Walter Erhart are interested in analyzing comparisons and practices of comparing themselves, which they find essential in establishing relations between different units, ordering the world, reducing complexity and propelling intellectual and historical change (Epple and Erhart, “Welt beobachten” 18; Epple, “*Doing Comparisons*” 174). In “*Doing Comparisons – Ein praxeologischer Zugang zur Geschichte der Globalisierung/en*,” Epple points out that comparing is a complex practice that is malleable and in which at least two *comparata* are put in relation to a *tertium* by at least one actor, who is situated in a particular context. Depending on various factors such as time, place, culture, and who is comparing, what is compared (i.e. the *comparata*) differs and so do the functions and effects of comparing. The *comparata* are not ‘given’ but ‘produced’ by the actors by choosing a *tertium*. Comparisons are therefore, seemingly, the result of numerous activities, decisions, and choices that are themselves based on a number of assumptions and negotiations, e.g. regarding sameness or difference of the *comparata*, and consequential choices regarding inclusion and exclusion of certain aspects. These factors influence decisions about such central questions as: which *comparata* and *tertia* should be chosen and on which basis (e.g. similarity or difference)? This

complex process gives room for innovations, deviations, transformations, production of (new) knowledge, and negotiating issues of sameness and difference (Epple, “*Doing Comparisons*” 162-163, 193-194). [5] Similarly, Johannes Grave highlights the importance of practices and routines involved in (un-)doing comparisons which can create new forms of acting and comparing while curbing others. Grave’s praxeological approach allows for the exploration of decisions and assumptions regarding the choice, perception, and evaluation of *comparata* and *tertia*, the creation and prioritization of particular categories, and implied values or judgements of relevance, difference, and similarity. Routines and repetitions can stabilize certain practices, essentialize and naturalize assumptions (e.g., regarding sameness or difference, inclusion or exclusion). At the same time, they can also produce differences and transformations (Grave, “*Vergleichen als Praxis*” 142-146). In this view, comparisons and practices of comparing not only contribute to prejudice and stereotypes. They also have the potential for challenging established notions, categories and re-ordering and thus transforming the world (Epple and Erhart, “*Welt beobachten*” 10; Epple, “*Doing Comparisons*” 166).

Comparisons and practices of comparing are thus neither innocent nor objective. In order to be able to do comparisons, it has to be assumed that the objects, elements, or aspects to be compared (*comparata*) share some characteristics (commensurability). Furthermore, criteria (*tertia comparationis*) are necessary to observe differences (or similarities) between the *comparata*. In doing comparisons, it is actors who differentiate; they create categories and establish hierarchies between different *comparata*. Different regions, ‘races’, groups, cultures, sexes, beliefs, or forms and styles of cultural production are compared by various actors – by individuals, groups, and institutions. This holds true for popular discourses, the humanities as well as the natural sciences, for example with regard to racial ideology (Epple and Erhart, “*Welt beobachten*” 13). However, as the articles by Wilfried Raussert and Claudia Hachenberger show, alternative practices of comparing, which emerged, for example, in

the context of subaltern, countercultural and avant-garde movements, have the potential to challenge and re-negotiate old or to create new categories and to undermine or destabilize particular power structures/relations. This also applies to the field of identity politics where, for example, indigenous and afro-descendent groups have drawn upon global comparisons, imagined transnational and translocal relations, and focused on similarities between people of African ‘descent’ in the Americas and beyond, thus creating global ‘indigenous’ or ‘black’ communities with ‘shared’ characteristics.

Numerous comparative studies exist, which relate, among others, literature, regions, or cultures in the Americas. The same cannot be said for studies decidedly dedicated at exploring not only comparisons, but also practices of comparing in the Americas, including, but also going beyond issues such as, who compares to which end, or in what regard social or cultural developments contribute to new practices of comparing, and vice versa. This is a *desideratum* which the present special issue of *fiar*, “*Doing and Undoing Comparisons in the Americas from the Colonial Times to the Present*,” aims to address. This issue took shape as part of ongoing research in the context of the SFB 1288 “*Practices of Comparing. Changing and Ordering the World*” at Bielefeld University, which is funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG). In accordance to *fiar*’s objective of fostering a dialogic and interdisciplinary approach to the study of the Americas, the articles included in this issue not only explore a variety of comparisons and practices of comparing in various periods, regions and contexts, but also approach their topic from angles opened up by different disciplines such as film studies, cultural studies, literary studies, art history, history, sociology and political sciences. The main focus of this issue lies on negotiations and differentiations, especially regarding issues of sameness and difference, self and other, and the innovative power of (un-)doing comparisons. It is in this context that the articles also explore the functions marginalized positions have had with regard to practices of comparing; the variety of actors involved in or excluded from practices of comparing. The articles further probe whether new practices of

comparing have replaced old ones; ask whether established practices of comparing have triggered new ones or contributed to negotiating old categories; and examine the role practices of comparing have played in postcolonial thinking.

Exploring practices of comparing in the Americas appears to be of special interest because of the region's colonial history, its common history of separation from the European colonial yoke, and the hybridity of its cultures emerging from the exchange between colonizer and colonized and between various colonized and enslaved populations. According to Wilfried Raussert, "'America/América' as geopolitical, cultural and social manifestation should be seen as 'entangled Americas' beyond closed national and area spaces" (Raussert 63). Seen this way, the Americas represent a space/place, in which – beyond rigid binary structures, contact zones, entanglements, forms of assimilation, and hybridization have produced in-between and fluid categories that not only complicate or refuse simple comparisons and classifications, but also stimulate re-negotiations of and reflections on particular categories, and excite new practices of comparing.

Particularly, Raussert's and Rath's essays in the present issue reveal what practices of comparing mean for negotiating identity politics between subaltern and hegemonic positions. Here, comparing functions as a mediator and testing ground for the actor's positioning between the margin and the mainstream while comparing. As both articles show, practices of comparing not only fix but also challenge and mobilize *tertia* and tropes like 'blackness.' Subaltern practices of comparing that, for example, aim for self-assertion and inclusion have the potential to challenge the elements involved in comparisons and not only question the choice or re-negotiate the meaning of the *tertia* but also *comparata*, generating new inclusions and exclusions, and identifications of similarities and differences. In doing so, these alternative practices of comparing also shed light on (the dynamics and tensions involved in these) hegemonic practices of comparing, which also distinguish between the self and the other, amongst others, in order to relegate and project undesirable aspects onto the 'other'. This is,

for example, discernible when (scientific) racist actors chose 'whites' and 'blacks' as comparata and progress or self-governance as *tertia*. As Raussert and Rath show, alternative or subaltern practices of comparing not only have the potential of re-evaluating, re-defining, and re-ordering 'the world,' i.e. challenging seemingly established truths, but that these practices also have innovative potential, so much so that they influenced not only artistic cultural production but also the sciences/academia. "'We Wear the Masks,' *Reflexivity*, and Black Practices of Comparing in the Harlem Renaissance," the essay by Raussert (Bielefeld), looks at the field of cultural production during the Harlem Renaissance and in particular those works of literature and art that had a particular focus on self-reflexivity of the comparing actors. Adopting close reading, Raussert explores in what regard (self-) reflexivity on part of the authors and "masking strategies" can be seen in the context of practices of comparing in the course of which the *tertium* blackness is (re-) negotiated, resulting in turn in its (re-) emergence as a floating signifier. Gudrun Rath (Linz) explores how nineteenth century Haitian diasporic intellectuals such as Joseph Janvier or Joseph Anténor Firmin challenged practices of comparing, which were essential for scientific racism. As Rath asserts, Firmin methodically dissected and laid bare the arbitrariness and subjectivity of scientific practices (of comparing) and methods in the context of pseudoscience and what he called "false anthropology" – practices and methods that aimed at 'proving' an alleged white superiority. Challenging racist notions of racial difference, he instead underscored the sameness of human beings. At the same time, he challenged what 'blackness' means, in particular against the background of the Haitian Revolution, by implicitly comparing black achievement in this context to black potential in general.

In contrast, Olaf Kaltmeier's and Hachenberger's contributions explore how practices of comparing contribute to establishing and cementing the hegemonic order, power structures and inequalities by focusing on differences between the self and the other. In "*Narcos* and the Promotion of a U.S.

(Informal) Cultural Empire Based on Processes of Stereotyping and Comparison” Claudia Hachenberger (Erlangen-Nürnberg) claims that the United States of America can be seen as an informal cultural empire that, for example, via practices of comparing, engages in Latinism (similar to Said’s Orientalism) in its cultural production. Using the series *Narcos* (Netflix, 2015-2017) as an example, she explores how the U.S. constructs – via numerous, repeated explicit and implicit comparisons on a visual, verbal, structural and productional level – Latin America and Latin Americans as the inferior ‘other.’ In “Invidious Comparison and the New Global Leisure Class: On the Re-feudalization of Consumption in the Old and New Gilded Age,” on the other hand, Kaltmeier (Bielefeld) explores class issues in the “New Gilded Age.” He explores the practices of comparing that the contemporary global elite resorts to in order to distinguish itself from others and cement its elite status. The global elite groups compare themselves with each other, Kaltmeier contends, in terms of conspicuous consumption, expensive hobbies, and philanthropy.

The next two articles by Carsten Schinko and Marcus Hartner highlight, respectively, how cultural products such as works of fiction have the potential to show practices of comparing at work, namely how they simultaneously construct (via highlighting and including similarities and differentiating and excluding other aspects) the elements and concepts involved in comparisons and in doing so help reveal the underlying issues and (power-) structures involved with issues of race and class. They further shed light on the ways these works can undermine simplistic readings and categorizations. Tracing discussions by intellectuals such as Du Bois, Ta-Nehisi Coates, Walter Benn Michaels and Adolph Reed and works of fiction by authors such as William Faulkner, Erskine Caldwell, and Bobbie Ann Mason, Schinko (Stuttgart/Berlin) analyzes how practices of comparing (re-)negotiate *tertia* such as poverty or whiteness and comparata such as poor blacks and whites and the decent (poor) whites and white trash in his essay “How (Not) to Compare White Poverty? Class Issues, Socioeconomic Suffering, Literature.” Schinko further explores how Old and New Left

discourses use class as a “tool of comparison” in order to argue over whether class is the “main defining feature” of societies or whether “class stratifications” can be seen as a “secondary feature.” “Placing Prospero’s Island: (Post) Colonial Practices of Comparing in the Academic Reception of Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*” by Marcus Hartner (Bielefeld) discusses, tracing and exploring colonial, postcolonial, and ‘Old World readings’ of the play, different practices of comparing. Conventional and postcolonial readings of this play both compare Prospero’s island with other descriptions of the New World in the period, where they also locate it. Both readings differentiate between the ‘self’ and the ‘other’ while comparing. However, while the former focuses on similarities between this fictional island and the New World in order to see the former as representing the ‘uncivilized’ ‘other,’ postcolonial readings of the play re-evaluate this imaginary place/space and its representatives. Since for Hartner the practices of comparing involved in both readings of the play have their limitations, he pleads for an alternate, third way.

This issue closes with articles by Quiñones Triana, Elena Furlanetto and Pablo Campos, each tracing how practices of comparing contribute to a number of transformations in what Latin America means, the meaning of concepts such as creole and indigenist practices. In “Gilberto Freyre entre duas Américas Latinas: a lusitana e a hispana. Análise da transformação da interpretação do Autor com relação a influência espanhola e portuguesa em América,” Yago Quiñones Triana (Brasília) traces a major transformation in Gilberto Freyre’s thought. Freyre was a Brazilian sociologist and anthropologist, well known for comparing Portugal to and differentiating it from other colonizing nations. However, Quiñones Triana highlights how Freyre, in the course of his works, underlined the similarity of Portuguese and Spanish colonization projects and differentiated them from Anglo-Saxon colonization. This transformation can be seen in the context of and echoing other similar developments in the Americas. In her essay “Declensions: Conceptual Migrations Across Europe,” Furlanetto (Duisburg-Erlangen) explores how the meanings of concepts such

as creole or renegade changed and developed, amongst others, via inclusions and exclusions and thus practices of comparing. Using the declension paradigm to track various meanings, she argues that “declensions reverse the act of translation, which is at the basis of the comparative endeavor.” In “‘Early’ and ‘Modern’ Indigenist Practices – A Comparative Analysis of the Ecuadorian and the Mexican Cases,” Campos (Bielefeld) examines indigenous practices in Ecuador and Mexico and discusses how “comparisons in the form of *structuring structures* in Bourdieusian sense” give shape to “modern’ indigenist practices.”

Endnotes

[1] On a similar/related phenomenon, i.e., the ubiquity of rankings, see, for example, Elena Esposito and David Stark, “What’s Observed in a Rating?” *Theory, Culture & Society* (2019) 1-3.

[2] See, for example, Angelika Epple and Walter Erhart “Die Welt beobachten – Praktiken des Vergleichens.” *Die Welt beobachten: Praktiken des Vergleichens* edited by Epple and Erhart (Frankfurt: Campus, 2015: 11-16, 22). See also Niklas Luhmann, “Kultur als historischer Begriff.” *Gesellschaftsstruktur und Semantik – Studien zur Wissenssoziologie der modernen Gesellschaft* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1999), 35-36; Bettina Heintz „Numerische Differenz. Überlegungen zu einer Soziologie des (quantitativen) Vergleichs/Numerical difference. Toward a sociology of (quantitative) comparisons.“ *Zeitschrift für Soziologie* 39.3 (2010): 165-166; Bettina Heintz „Wir leben im Zeitalter der Vergleichung.“ *Perspektiven einer Soziologie des Vergleichs.* *Zeitschrift für Soziologie* 45.5 (2016): 309-310. Critics such as Heintz, however, correctly point out that comparisons also played an important role in earlier periods.

[3] On the juxtaposition and comparison of the ‘old’ with the ‘new’ world, see, for example, Epple and Erhard “Die Welt beobachten,” 8-10. On comparisons and practices of comparing with regard to the Americas, see, for example, Ann Laura Stoler, “Tense and tender ties: The politics of comparison in North American history and (post) colonial studies.” *The Journal of American History* 88.3 (2001): 829-865. On the constructedness of the Americas see, for example, Caroline F. Levander and Robert S. Levine “Introduction: Essays Beyond the Nation.” *Hemispheric American Studies*, edited by Caroline F. Levander and Robert S. Levine (New Brunswick, New Jersey, and London: Rutgers University Press, 2008: 4-5).

[4] See Epple and Erhard “Die Welt beobachten,” 13-17. See also, for example, R. Radhakrishnan “Why Compare?” *New Literary History* 40.3 (2009): 453-471; Pheng Cheah “Grounds of Comparison.” *Diacritics* 29.4 (1999) 3-18; Susan Stanford Friedman, “Why Not Compare?” *PMLA* 126.3

(2011): 753-762; Angelika Epple „Doing Comparisons-ein Praxeologischer Zugang zur Geschichte der Globalisierung/en.“ *Die Welt beobachten: Praktiken des Vergleichens* edited by Epple and Erhart (Frankfurt: Campus, 2015: 168); Antje Flüchter, “Die Nairen der Malaberküste zwischen Adelsstand und Kriegerkaste. Praktiken des Vergleichens und die europäische Weltaneignung.“ *HerStory. Historical Scholarship between South Asia and Europe: Festschrift in Honour of Gita Dharampal-Frick* edited by Rafael Klöber and Manju Ludwig (Heidelberg: xasia, 2018) 6-7.

[5] See also Epple and Erhard “Die Welt beobachten,” 12-19, 24.

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