Comparing Societies in World History

by Peter Stearns

Peter Stearns is an accomplished author, historian, and professor, who held positions at George Mason University, Carnegie Mellon University, and the Dietrich College of Humanities and Social Studies. He founded the Journal of Social History and his works have contributed greatly to the advancement of teaching global history. In this passage, he argues that comparative historical analysis is an integral tool for historians.

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Comparing different societies creates greater understanding than looking at one case after another with no connection…. The message is: comparison provides meaning, it takes knowledge of more than one case, it takes active analysis and not simply listing one thing and then another. Geography also lends itself to some important but often fairly focused comparisons. For example: compare the river systems of Western Europe and West Africa and see if this helps you explain why Europe turned out to be much more attuned to shipping, even though both societies had active merchant traditions.

Comparison gets even more interesting when the subjects are more complicated than population figures or specific geography facts. World history deliberately covers a number of fairly separate societies. You'll be discussing, for the world in 1750, political patterns in Western Europe but also in Japan – both cases in which rapid change was occurring but quite separately. You'll be talking about different cultures – how the Scientific Revolution in Europe compared to beliefs in Confucian China, or in the Islamic Ottoman Empire. Again, the basic argument will remain: comparison improves understanding about different societies far more than studying one at a time.

Comparison will sometimes be surprising, which is an additional treat; and it can produce good debates. Historians have long known that Britain began to industrialize soon after 1750. And they have known that China did not. An easy assumption was that the British economy by this point was so far ahead of the

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Chinese that this further difference is easy to explain. NOT. We now know that China was just about as wealthy and as business minded as Europe at this point. Real comparison, and not easy assumption, creates a new picture. And it has to stimulate new kind of argument. For if the difference in economic level was not that great, what other factors would cause one society to industrialize while the other long delayed? Comparing causes should be both challenging and revealing. . . .

Comparison creates greater meaning. It raises additional questions, including debates about causes and results. It can provoke some new insights into one's own society, which can be particularly challenging.

How does actual comparison work? Take a couple of cases of major societies around 1700: the Ottoman and Mughal Empires. If asked to compare them, you may first want to list major points about each case – the fact that the Mughals, who were Muslim, ruled a Hindu-majority society, for example, or the fact that the Ottomans had earlier expanded their conquests into southeastern Europe. But two points quickly: don't stop with the separate frameworks, for they have to be combined for comparison; case by case lists will not do the job. Second: if you note something about one society, remember you have to note its counterpart in the other. So if you note the religious situation and challenge to tolerance for the Mughals, compare this actively with the Ottomans. Or if you note the Ottoman expansion beyond traditional borders, see how this compares with Mughal military goals. Don't leave a point about one society dangling. And of course, don't lose sight of basic features: both empires originated through invasion from the outside, both were gunpowder empires – these points transcend case by case lists and can help leads you directly into comparative analysis.

A couple of other points about comparison in world history should be helpful. First – though you know this already; it's just a reminder – comparison can reveal similarities and not just differences. In world history courses, because several separate

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societies are examined, students on the whole tend to look for contrasts. But sometimes apparently different surface patterns should be peeled away, for the big point is considerable similarity. This was already clear in looking at obvious overlaps between the Ottoman and Mughal cases.

Even more often, comparison asks you to think about the balance between different and similar, not just one or the other. Japan in 1750 was strongly influenced by neo-Confucianism. Western Europe was not. But both societies had been increasing their literacy rates quite rapidly, and by 1750 they (along with colonial North America) had the highest rates in the world – with Japan just a tad behind. So what's more important here, the cultural difference or the unexpected overlap? Depends, probably, on what you're trying to explain.

Another point to remember. Some possible comparisons make no sense at all. You all know the phrase, it's like comparing apples and oranges. Can you think of some apples and oranges possibilities for the world around 1750, and how you would decide that the comparison simply isn't worth trying?

And here's a further guideline. Comparison in world history is not usually helped if you're thinking in terms of better or worse (which is, I admit, a comparison). You may decide that the Ottoman government around 1750 was not working as well as the British, but you won't be doing yourself a favor if you start out with that mindset. The start should be: what was each system in its own terms, and then how can they be explored through comparison. Sometimes a further result will be a better or worse, but that should come, if at all, only after you've sketched the basic comparison.

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