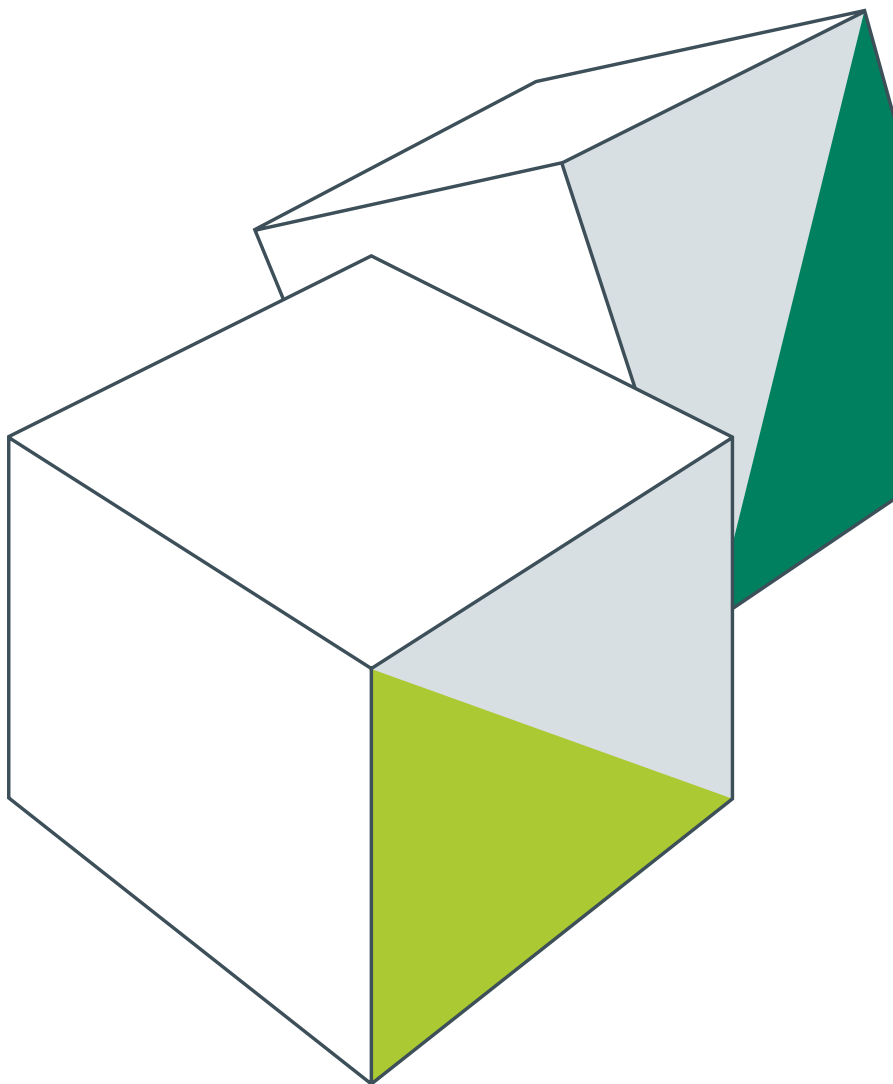


# PRACTICES OF COMPARING. ORDERING AND CHANGING THE WORLD

05 – 07 October 2017 | Bielefeld University  
International Kickoff Conference

## Conference Report



Universität Bielefeld

SFB 1288  
PRACTICES  
OF COMPARING

## REPORT: DR. DES. MAHSHID MAYAR

---

From 05 to 07 October 2017, Bielefeld University hosted the International Kickoff Conference of the SFB 1288, "Practices of Comparing: Ordering and Changing the World". The conference was organized with the objective of expanding the SFB's international network and further connecting its research endeavors to other scholars across the globe working with comparative practices in history, sociology, political science, art history, philosophy, literary studies, historical image studies, and law.

The conference opened with the broad question 'What do actors do when they compare?' Organized into six panels, the program included two keynote lectures by Ann Laura Stoler (New School for Social Research), and Haun Saussy (University of Chicago), as well as 18 presentations by junior and senior researchers from Europe, Asia, and the United States. On the empirical side, topics ranged from research on various historical, sociological, political, literary, and art historical cases such as Blumenbach's 'beautiful skull' and the emergence of the science of race, early instances of applying rankings in art criticism and later adaptation in literature, competitive sports and international benchmarking (among others), and the many reincarnations of Odysseus in European literature. On the theoretical side, projects focused on topics such as typology of comparative practices, limits of comparison, and non-comparability. The presentations further examined pre-modern, modern, and contemporary acts of comparative seeing, the Renaissance's comparative stance toward world religions, questions of imitation, exchange and distanciation between the East and the West, negotiation of military balances at the end of the Cold War era, comparative practices and expressions in travel writing, and the SFB's attempt at systematizing pattern recognition in detecting and classifying comparative utterances in poetry, politics, and religion and its involvement with the development of digital tools and research within the frame of the digital humanities.

Thus, the conference began with a talk by ANGELIKA EPPLE (History, Bielefeld) that offered a careful examination into the roots of the concept of 'whiteness'. To this end, her talk examined the 18th-century scientific debates in western Europe over polygeneism and Johann Friedrich Blumenbach's and his students' fascination with and their attempts at measuring, comparing, and classifying human skulls. Throughout her talk, Epple pointed at two aspects of the SFB's engagement with historical practices of comparing: first, to understand the nature of comparative practices in their historical – far from neutral, and more often than not colonial – contexts; and, second, to develop ways to analyze their potential to shape ensuing practices of comparison, such as the art and aesthetics of seeing in the centuries that followed.

The three talks in Panel I visited the question of international rankings. LEOPOLD RINGEL and TOBIAS WERRON (Sociology, Bielefeld) delved into the topic of rankings

in order to establish a historical sociology of rankings. Part of a larger SFB research project on rankings in arts, sports, and among universities and nation-states, their talk began by asking whether to rank is a uniquely modern practice. Following their talk, MATTHIAS KRANKE (Politics and International Studies, Warwick), gave an account of international benchmarking as yet another instance of ranking the nation-states. Reporting on the results of a joint research project at Warwick, his talk focused on the power and pathologies of contemporary global benchmarking practices. The two papers resonated with one another in their focus not only on rankings, but on the power of evaluations in exaggerating and/or playing down differences and similarities between the entities compared.

Throughout the conference, many presentations raised questions about practices of comparing, their potential and their limits. ANN LAURA STOLER (Anthropology/History, New School for Social Research) set the stage for this discussion with her keynote lecture 'AT THE LIMITS OF COMPARISON'. Throughout her talk, Stoler offered a careful inspection of the eventful outer limits of comparison – the historical borderlands left mostly unexplored due to comparisons' capacity to sustain attention to their seeming transparency and benevolence at the center. Zooming in on historical colonial practices of comparing, Stoler reviewed colonial comparisons and their omniscient 'relational force' in marking boundaries, producing concepts, and justifying and substantiating colonial governance. She defined colonialism in terms of comparisons by calling them 'networks of calculated comparisons,' rampantly at work in the guise of journalism, education, demographics, punitive practices, etc. across the colonial board. In conclusion, Stoler cautioned against overlooking comparisons' power to create commanding normative regimes of knowledge, theory-driven models, and persistent imperial myths and further commented on the risks involved in the avid consumption of certain forms of comparison in academia while ignoring certain of its political outcomes and the ensuing judgements and acts of inclusion and exclusion (who gets to be dispossessed, exterminated, displaced and based on what criteria).

**The second day** of the conference included three panels and two individual talks that drifted between empiricism and conceptual considerations. The discussion of practices of comparing in the realm of literature by WALTER ERHART (Literary Studies, Bielefeld) brought the focus of the conference to language and literary utterances, devices and forms. Erhart shared reflections on the questions 'is literature a comparative practice?' and 'how does literature work when it compares?' Reemphasizing that comparisons are not neutral, Erhart's talk operated as a critical odyssey through the various reincarnations, transferences, and literary comparisons made to the story of Odysseus as a pretext and a departure point for

## REPORT: DR. DES. MAHSHID MAYAR

---

future acts of comparing in western literature, such as in Dante's *Inferno*, where metaphors create narratological 'regions of meaning'.

Meanwhile, in Panel II, HARTMUT VON SASS (Philosophy of Science, ETH Zürich) picked up the conceptual discussions on practices of comparison in a talk that explored incomparability and/in contrast to non-comparability in an attempt to arrive at a model for practices of comparing. The second paper on this panel was delivered by CARLOS SPOERHASE (Literary Studies, Bielefeld). His research revisited the question of rankings, tracing its historical roots back to (and pinpointing the centrality of numeric comparisons in) as unlikely a field as European art and literary criticism in the 18th century.

The conference refocused in Panel III on practices of comparing in the art scene: comparative seeing, connoisseurship and curatorial practices from the 18th to the 20th century. The panel consisted of three talks by art historians PETER GEIMER (Art History, FU Berlin), JORIS CORIN HEYDER (Art History, Bielefeld) and BRITTA HOCHKIRCHEN (Art History, Bielefeld). The talks engaged, respectively, with comparative seeing, comparative making of artistic taste, and comparative viewing. Addressing the ethics and limits of artistic comparability, its curatorial potential in traversing physical geography, and its physical and material contextualizations, the talks promised further nuanced findings regarding the acts of collecting, curating, comparing, and looking at art in early-modern and modern times.

The discussions on the differences between audacious and odious acts of comparing in the world of art history were followed by a talk on the research potential offered by digital humanities in discovering, annotating, sampling, interpreting, illustrating and representing practices of comparing in the SFB's various subprojects. SILKE SCHWANDT and ANNA-MARIA KOMPRECHT (both Bielefeld) introduced the project INF of the collaborative research center and further talked about the ways in which digital tools have changed our research practices, including how we compare and analyze comparisons.

Panel IV COMPARING IN EARLY MODERN LITERATURE AND HISTORY focused on comparative practices in Renaissance and early modern France. ANDREA FRISCH (Literary Studies, Maryland) gave a talk on the challenges of doing comparative history in European Renaissance by pointing to numerous translation projects from ancient Greek and Roman works during the Renaissance in order to make sense of the present degeneracy in the light of an ideal past. As Frisch demonstrated through the example of Louise LeRoy, these comparative attempts to restore the old ideals ultimately led to doubts about the value of that very past. Following Frisch's discussion about durability, mutability, and dynamicity of comparative practices along the axis of time, KIRSTEN KRAMER (Literary

Studies, Bielefeld) looked into practices of comparing along the axis of space. Examining 18th–20th century French travel writing in its attempts to measure, document and ultimately colonize the world at large, Kramer's talk evaluated comparative narratives and their power to 'construct worlds,' to encourage competitive imaginings of nature vs. civilization, savage vs. civilized, and the Americas vs. the Orient within these worlds of imagination, and to endorse 'armchair travelling,' that is, consuming travel narratives as surrogate acts of exploring the world for those who did not or could not travel extensively.

Papers presented so far touched upon a wide range of questions about practices of comparing – attempts to trace back modern practices of comparing to their point of origin in history in order to better understand their many incarnations on their way to present practices of comparing, weaving in and out of the world of art history, travel writing, professional sports, colonial governance, and literature. These themes were picked up once more in the keynote lecture by HAUN SAUSSY (Comparative Literature, Chicago) in a talk called 'ARE WE COMPARING YET? AN ASIANIST REVISITS MARCEL DETIENNE'. Saussy's keynote lecture entailed a careful reading of Marcel Detienne's *Comparing the Incomparable* (Stanford UP: 2008), drawing distinctions between comparisons (apples and oranges are comparable as they both belong to the continuum 'fruit') and dogmatic practices of incomparability (comparing oranges to apples in terms of their 'apple-ness'). Through detailed examination of various examples (translation, comparative anatomy, and comparative linguistics), Saussy drew a number of foundational conclusions about what it means to compare: comparisons are stepping stones on our way to reconceiving the known in terms of the unknown; comparisons made with the sole purpose of evaluating and of passing judgements are non-reflexive and prejudiced; we need to collect as many points of view before we can offer a comparative critique of the phenomena at hand (and passing any judgements); every powerful entity (be it the British Empire or the Ming Dynasty) compares in order to survive; and, finally – in response to the question posed in the title of Saussy's talk – we are always 'almost there' with our comparisons for it is not in the nature of comparisons ever to be over.

In the light of the debates made in the first two days that culminated in a discussion (initiated by Ann Stoler) at the end of Saussy's talk about the necessity of distinguishing radical (unsettling and critical) and conservative (affirmative and confirming) comparisons, papers on **the third day** of the conference added case studies from imperial Russia, Marco Polo's China, medieval England, Meiji Japan, Cold War NATO and Warsaw Pact signatories to the picture. The day opened with a talk by ALEXANDER MARTIN (History, Notre Dame) who gave an account of the 'Russian soul' in the 18th and 19th century in terms

of Russia's perceived distance and difference from the West. Focusing on cartography and landscape painting, Martin demonstrated how comparisons, imitations, and ultimately the search for the Russian vernacular away from Europe helped shape the Russian soul in terms of geography and culture.

Placing Marco Polo's travels to China in various historical moments between the 15th and the 18th centuries, LONGXI ZHANG (Chinese and History, Hong Kong) pointed at the various ways Enlightenment Europe compared their habits, values, and practices to their Chinese counterparts in terms of social mobility, religiosity, meritocracy, etc. in order to understand, criticize, and improve itself. In a similar spirit, GARY SHAW (History, Wesleyan) paid attention to the slippery and at the same time rich nature of comparisons in a talk that focused on medieval practices of comparing in England. Their specific historical settings and the geographical coordinates of their case studies aside, all three of these talks suggested that practices of comparing – powerful tools in the service of ideologies, colonial projects, and religious systems of thought – have historically been viewed with ambivalence: they have been temporarily resorted to, revisited or entirely resisted by actors who could not fully denounce comparisons and yet did not hail it all as sacred either.

Not unlike previous talks during the conference, Panel V examined the politics and paradoxes of comparisons in three talks: a pair of papers by THOMAS MÜLLER (Political Science, Bielefeld) and PEER VRIES (Economics, Amsterdam) revisited practices of comparing in the neighboring worlds of military might and economic prowess, respectively. Thus, Müller explored the role that the so-called 'battle of booklets' played in the 1980s in sustaining the fragile balance of power during the Cold War era before the practice stopped in 1991 (to be resumed this past summer by the new US government under President Trump). Similar in approach to Martin's presentation on the 'Russian soul', Peer Vries' talk, on the other hand, rewound the historical tape back to the turn of the 20th century and focused on the significance of comparing as Meiji Japan attempted to modernize itself in the image of the West. Vries explained how Meiji Japan of the late 19th century tended, rather prudently and successfully, to initiate nationwide reforms by establishing relations with the world at large, an intentional encounter with the West that was followed by its systematic attempts at the beginning of the 20th century to ultimately keep Europeans at bay. The final talk was delivered by KIRILL POSTOUTENKO (History, Bielefeld) who teased out the paradoxes and patterns of recognizing and earmarking comparison in poetry, political speech, and religious pamphlets. Postoutenko shared a glimpse into the initial attempts in the SFB's subproject C03 in earmarking comparative utterances in image- and discourse-based forms of communication.

Throughout the conference, several papers addressed practices of comparing as tools of colonial governance, inclusion and exclusion, knowledge production, and benchmarking racial, national, cultural, economic, and military differences. Together, they underscored comparisons' *métier*, perniciousness, omniscience, and slipperiness, triggered discussions about in- and non-comparability and the outer ends of comparisons (absolute incomparability vs. universalism). Thus, the conference served not only to call attention to the relevance of practices of comparing and comparative utterances, but also to trigger interest in the instances where comparisons prove infertile or are actively avoided by agents of comparison. Though differing in focus and approach, all the studies highlighted the timeliness of the SFB's attempts to inform scholarship in their respective fields of research about comparing as a foundational component of historical, sociological, political, literary, and philosophical inquiries.