

# A Transnational World? The Implications of Transnationalism for Comparative Historical Sociology

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**Abstract:** The essay seeks to explore the implications of transnational and global history for comparative historical sociology, especially in light of notions of entangled history, postcolonial critiques, theories of the 'Global South,' and new interpretations of empire. It offers an assessment of the implications of the transnational turn for comparative history, arguing that, despite some of the claims made, this should largely be seen as a shift rather than a turn and as a corrective rather than a fundamentally new paradigm. Following from a discussion of some of the issues that have arisen from the transnational turn, in particular with respect to the work of a new generation of global historians, such as Bayly, Osterhammel and Pomeranz, the essay then considers the different contribution of comparative historical sociology, including civilizational analysis, as in the work of Eisenstadt and Arnason. The argument is advanced that while comparative historical sociology is today in crisis as a result of being overtaken by developments within transnational and global history, it offers much promise. The two fields cannot be entirely separated, but comparative historical sociology has a strong tradition of comparative analysis that is different from historiographical analysis and which remains undeveloped. The specificity of the sociological dimension is urgently in need of renewal. It is argued that this largely resides in an interpretative approach to social inquiry. However, this has not yet been fully exploited in relation to transnationalism.

**Keywords:** Comparative History — Entanglements — S. N. Eisenstadt — Modernity — Historical Sociology — Global History — Transnational History

## Introduction

Classical sociology was inherently historical. This is hardly surprising since much of sociology emerged from historical inquiry and its major questions were historical ones, such as the emergence of modern society, the transition

from feudalism to capitalism, the formation of the modern state, and the influence of the reformation on capitalism. While modern empirical sociology, in particular qualitative sociology, broke the link with history,<sup>1</sup> it was preserved in macro-sociology and many of the main approaches in social theory were very much about historical questions. Indeed, all big-picture theorising inevitably entails historical analysis. It was arguably the case that sociology, in particular comparative historical sociology, took over the task from historians in accounting for the relationship of the past to the present and its future. Some of the most important accounts of historical transformations were undertaken either by sociologists or by interdisciplinary theorists, such as Karl Polanyi and Barrington Moore.

The nature of historical writing has changed and historians have regained the ground occupied by comparative historical sociologists, especially on major questions relating to transnationalism. The beginnings of this can be found in world history, but with the recent rise and huge growth of transnational and global history, a major methodological shift has taken place in historiographical analysis, although, as I shall argue, this has not been fully theorised. While that shift has indeed produced a crisis in comparative analysis, it has also led to a crisis of a different nature in comparative historical sociological analysis, which in many ways appears to be overtaken by the shift to the transnational. The essay begins by discussing the rise and significance of transnational and global history for comparative analysis as practised largely by historians. The second part of the essay looks at comparative historical sociology more specifically and in relation to transnationalism. The main focus here will be on civilizational analysis and what I see as its weak theorisation of transnationalism. The third section of the essay considers the future of comparative historical sociology in light of its current crisis and considers how comparative analysis and transnationalism could be linked.

### **Transnational and Global History**

The very conception of narratives of historical time has been hugely challenged by developments relating to transnational and global history, which appear to question the centrality given to nations in older approaches to historical writing that took for granted the spatial and temporal categories of modernity.<sup>2</sup> This is to a large degree the result of the influence on historical writing of developments within the social sciences, in particular in relation to culture and agency. Both cultural theory and social theory since the 1980s led to entirely new insights into the nature of culture and society that challenged the presuppositions of historiographical scholarship, which largely saw its task to be the narration of the nation. The so-called linguistic turn in modern thought along with the revolution brought about by Foucault led to new insights about power, knowledge and the making of modern subjectivity. These developments at first questioned only the foundations of western

modernity—opening up new and hidden histories that were suppressed by the dominant discourses—and had no implications for global analysis. In fact, Foucault himself initially did not question the implications of his approach for the analysis of the non-western world. Indeed, the ruptures he wrote about in *The Order of Things* referred only to discontinuities within western thought and practice.

The transnational shift in historical analysis itself preceded the linguistic turn, but was given a major impetus by new thinking about culture and power since Foucault. The orthodox approaches had presupposed a Eurocentric understanding of the world. Edward Said's signal work, *Orientalism*, in 1979 paved the way for a new and fresh approach to history, even if in the final analysis he produced a theory that had major methodological problems. Its main contribution was to provide a foundation for postcolonial theory and a critique of Eurocentrism. However, one should not forget that the Eurocentric assumptions of nineteenth century historical analysis were earlier challenged within the relatively separate area of world history, the practitioners of which were often historical sociologists or interdisciplinary oriented historians, such as William McNeil, Marshall Hodgson, and the Annales School from Fernand Braudel to Immanuel Wallerstein. This was long before Said's contribution and not acknowledged by him. World history certainly had its limits; it was largely confined to the analysis of the world system prior to the early modern period and was principally concerned with the rise of the major world civilisations. Many developments today in transnational and global history as well as the contributions of postcolonial thought were anticipated in the works of these historians. Today world history has been largely overtaken by global history and derives from a new generation of interdisciplinary historians, such as Kenneth Pomeranz and Jürgen Osterhammel, rather than historical sociologists as such, many of whom have retreated into institutional analysis. Yet, for several decades world history was one of the main alternatives to conventional nation-based historical writing, as well as to international history, which is also based on the presupposition of nations as the main historical actors.

While comparative history has been very much challenged following the rise of transnational and global history, it should not be forgotten that comparative history was probably the most significant alternative to mainstream national history. Even if it is guilty of the methodological nationalism that it has often been charged with, comparative history cannot be seen as an ideology of nationalism. After all, comparison is about placing a given unit in a larger context which in turn leads to the relativizing of its apparent uniqueness. Clearly comparative analysis did not question the notion of territorially bounded nations *per se*, seeking instead to explore differences and or similarities with other nations. The dominant tendency has undoubtedly been to compare differences—the nature of the exception—reinforcing the coherence of national societies as units of analysis. There were undoubtedly Eurocentric

assumptions also underlying it, where the unit of comparison was generally about how other parts of the world diverged from Europe. The crisis of comparative analysis is highlighted by the fate of the *Sonderweg* thesis—the special path of German history—which has now been resolutely refuted with the recognition that every country is a special case, thus making comparison impossible if not meaningless in so far as it is about the analysis of the exception.

In contrast, world historians—many of whom were interdisciplinary sociologists—sought to identify signs of common worlds across a broad range of societies, though this was not always with comparison as the goal. Yet, comparison was always implicit in their analyses. Another limitation of comparative historical analysis is that it was not concerned with comparison itself as an object of analysis, that is to say it did not concern itself with the ways in which societies consciously compare themselves to other societies (see Seigal 2005). The methodological assumption of comparative analysis is not only that national societies are the main units of analysis, but that their interactions are of limited significance and not themselves the object of analysis. This is one of the main drawbacks of Skocpol's (1979)—in this case a comparative historical sociologist—famous comparative study of the French, Russian and Chinese revolutions. Her otherwise exemplary and now classic work never considered that the very condition of the possibility of the latter cases was the influence of the French revolution.

This is where the ground has shifted. The presumptions of methodological nationalism and Eurocentrism have been challenged by the shift to the transnational, which has informed both transnational and global history. I am using both of these more or less interchangeably despite their differences. It is probably more important to speak of a 'turn' than a 'shift', since the basic insights were already present in the older tradition of world history. Transnational history is not necessarily global history, while global history generally entails a concern with transnationalism since it is focussed on global processes and how the world is becoming more globally connected. The former is often concerned with major world regions—Europe, the Indian Ocean, the Atlantic world for instance—or major interactions of world regions, such as European and Asian linkages, and also with new conceptions of empire. Some qualifications are undoubtedly needed on the notion of the transnational. As used here, which I think reflects current use, transnationalism does not operate on the presumption of nations that simply interact with other nations. The emphasis is rather on the 'trans' in that what is foregrounded are processes of interaction which transform the very units in question and bring into being new units. There may indeed be a problem with the notion of transnationalism in that the term does not literally designate phenomena that are not national. It is obviously also problematical when it comes to pre-modern constellations in a world in which the nation did not yet exist, such as the Carolingian Empire or the Holy Roman Empire, since these were pre-national. Notwithstanding

these problems, there is not an adequate alternative available, other than possibly 'transcultural'. Global history, the most obvious competing concept, refers to broader processes that pertain to the world as a whole, but this may not be appropriate for many topics that require something larger than nations, but smaller than the world as a whole.

The shift to the transnational has led to a questioning of five assumptions of comparative history, which can be only briefly stated and undoubtedly too simplistically, since it is unlikely that all assumptions are to be found together in the work of any major historian, at least since the 1980s. The first is the idea that nations are homogeneous; the second is the view that nations are somehow autonomous actors relatively isolated from each other; the third, which follows from the previous two, is that the units of comparison are relatively comparable; the fourth is that the modern West can be understood in isolation from the rest of the world; and fifth, the assumption that the established concepts deriving from the western human and social sciences can be used to study non-western societies, despite their very different histories.

Transnational and global history, taken together, have produced alternative visions of the world which have challenged these assumptions—which not have been explicitly held by any one scholar—but not necessarily undermined the possibility of comparison. There are numerous examples of how our understanding of the world has been fundamentally changed as a result of the shift to the transnational. Instead of a vision of an ordered world organised temporally by western notions of periodisation and spatiality we have instead a new emphasis on entangled histories. Nations, civilisations and world regions are not only heterogeneous but interlinked and interlinked to a degree that makes heterogeneity possible. Such interlinkages cannot be explained only in terms of exogenous factors in a way that would privilege endogenous accounts of defined units, such as a nation or a civilisation. The presumption is not that there firstly exist defined cultural units, which subsequently interact with other units, since the interactions are structure-forming.

The accounts differ, as to whether the emphasis is on influences, connections or on hybrid entities. The recent emphasis on entangled history would see such links as of considerably greater significance than influences that need to be taken into account (see Manjapra 2014; Werner and Zimmermann 2006). Entangled history draws attention to links that are also more than connections, encounters, exchange, etc. but are formative of the units that are involved in the relationship and thus point to the formation of units of analysis that are interdependent and hybrid. This is because many transnational connections brought about a change in the units that came into contact and as a result they are no longer separate units to be compared.

This seems to me to be the crux of the matter. Comparative history has tended to presuppose relatively defined units of analysis in terms of time and space. The upshot of transnational and global history is to decentre spatial and

temporal categories by demonstrating how they arose; it puts in place different categories that capture more accurately the nature of transnational flows in terms of their hybrid and interdependent character. However, transnational and global history cannot quite do away with comparison, since it must be able to show how transnational connections bring about a changed situation from the one that previously existed. Additionally, due to the ramifications of the interaction, the changes in the interacting units must be compared.

The historical literature however is characterised by weak theoretical conceptualisations of transnationalism. The work of historians such as Christopher Bayly (2004), Jürgen Osterhammel (2014) and Kenneth Pommeranz (2000, 2007) represent the best of work in the field. Yet, they do not provide a theory of transnationalism and the fate of comparison remains unclear, despite the admirable efforts of Jürgen Kocka, who has argued for the compatibility of comparative analysis and transnational and global history (Haupt and Kocka 2009; see also Anderson 1998; Levine 2014). However, it is evident that transnational and global historians rely on some notion of comparison, even if what they compare is not necessarily nations.

A related but different problem, mentioned above, that the shift to the transnational has brought about is how to analyse non-western histories using concepts that are often highly problematical when applied to contexts where the historical reality is such that the reality that they describe does not exist, for example the notion of religion, church, civil society, classes etc. On this view, taken to the extreme, there is both an epistemological and ontological clash between the transnational vision and the comparative method due to the incommensurability or untranslatability of different historical contexts. This would imply that instead of connected histories there are instead only irreconcilable differences. However this would be an unnecessary conclusion because a degree of cultural and linguistic translation can rectify many problems (see Chakrabarty 2000; Delanty 2014). Clearly there are European-specific concepts—such as feudalism—that cannot be applied, but there are others—such as the notion of the state—which if not universally valid have proven to be workable concepts and others—for example, cosmopolitanism—which may be transferable to other contexts if a suitable register of meaning can be found.

The question is how significant are these developments and whether what they have brought about is a new paradigm or whether the turn to the transnational is a corrective rather than the death knell of comparative analysis. The answer is partly a matter of how precisely the question is posed. There can be no doubt that transnationalism has been hugely significant and not unlike the revolution in historical thinking brought about by Foucault in placing at the centre of historical analysis: hidden histories, the confluence of power and systems of knowledge. However, we cannot conclude that comparative analysis is dead, though this is certainly the direct implication of much of recent scholarship in transnational and global history, and where it is not, it

is the indirect outcome. The argument put forward here should be qualified: comparative historical analysis remains strong and it may be strengthened by the combined efforts of historians and sociologists.

While the method of comparing differences—with its traditional focus on the exception—does appear to be seriously challenged in some respects by the shift to the transnational, comparative historical analysis is much broader. The method of comparing similarities, for example, is still the basis of much of transnational and global history. Comparison is unavoidable in any kind of large-scale historical analysis. Much of transnational and global history does not fundamentally undermine the possibility of comparison, unless the extreme position of incommensurability is taken. The units in the comparison do not have to be nations or temporally and spatially fixed entities. It is in this respect that historical sociology can provide an alternative solution to the crisis of comparison.

Before moving onto look at historical sociology to the extent to which it can be separately identified, I would also like to comment that there was also a second shift in history, namely from structural history to conceptual history, brought about by Koselleck, a move that opened up greater space for the role of agency and, extending this to the work of Hayden White on metahistory, has major implications for interpretation. This indeed could be termed more of a 'turn' than a 'shift'. As part of the wider cultural or interpretative turn, these developments have significant implications for comparison, which rather than undermining it, have opened up new avenues, but as far as transnationalism is concerned this has remained somewhat underdeveloped.<sup>3</sup> This is perhaps where the real change has occurred. The problem looked at from this perspective is then less how comparative analysis is undermined by the transnational and global analysis, than how to reconcile the latter with the interpretative approaches, including those of Koselleck and other conceptual historians.

### **Developments in Comparative Historical Sociology**

Historians working in the broad field of transnational and global history rarely if ever clarify the nature of comparative analysis. Many have adopted encyclopaedic-style syntheses, such as Osterhammel's (2014) survey of the nineteenth century, Benjamin's (2009) study of the Atlantic world or Burbank and Cooper's (2011) study of world empires. Yet, all necessarily rely on comparison. A major survey of the twentieth century such as Eric Hobsbawm's much-praised work appears to operate with a chronology that only with considerable difficulty could be applied to the wider world.<sup>4</sup> Historical sociology, on the other hand, has had a rich tradition of comparative analysis that on the whole has not been based on the epistemological and ontological assumptions of nations as the given units of comparison. As mentioned earlier, world history itself emerged around largely macro-sociological analysis. However,

world history has been overshadowed by global history, which in having pioneered major research has led to an unclarified relationship with comparative history, which has been additionally confused with the rise of new notions of entangled history. Where in all of this is comparative historical sociology?

Classical comparative historical sociology, with its close connection with world history, has always been highly interdisciplinary. This was above all the legacy of Weber's comparative sociology of the world's civilisations. A great deal of it was influenced by Marxist analysis and has been primarily concerned with the macro-sociological analysis of major transformations in society in the course of history. It was also a feature of Durkheim's sociology and the view, deeply engrained in classical sociology, that sociology is by its nature comparative and historical. Comparative historical sociology was undoubtedly more comparative in its aims than primarily concerned with empirical analysis in that it largely relied on specialist historical research for its sources. This gave it a strongly theoretical slant that was a contrast to the history practised by historians. However, the two disciplines, history and sociology, cannot be so easily separated, as illustrated by the work of Barrington Moore, Charles Tilly or Michael Mann, which are very good examples of this understanding of historical sociology, with the work of Jürgen Osterhammel being a recent example from within the field of global history. There is perhaps also another approach, namely the application of sociological theory to the past without any attempt to account for the present (this probably accounts for much of what historical sociologists do, although not necessarily always in the form of comparative analysis. Much of this is primarily concerned with institutional analysis, usually within national settings). There is also a wider question on the theory of history concerning what is the past and how it should be understood in relation to the present in terms of memory, history and heritage. However, the main contributors to this have been historians such as Le Goff (Le Goff 1992; see also Paul 2015; Hartog 2015).

One of the most significant developments in comparative historical sociology has been civilisational analysis as pioneered by S. N. Eisenstadt (2000, 2003) and revived by Johann Arnason (2003) and others—the late Willfried Spohn and Jaroslav Krejci for example—who followed Eisenstadt's lead in establishing civilisations as the primary units of comparative analysis for a historically oriented sociology.<sup>5</sup> Civilisational analysis in this tradition is also a good example of the closely interacting fields of sociology and history. In contrast to earlier conceptions of civilisation, including those of classical sociology, civilisational analysis begins with the recognition of the pluralistic nature of civilisations without any presuppositions of a single model or the superiority of European civilisation, which is seen as one of many. For Arnason, more so than Eisenstadt, who gave primacy to European civilisation, this entails a strong perspective on the interactive dimension of civilisational patterns and dynamics (see also Adams et al. 2011). Civilisations are shaped



by their interactions with other civilisations, as opposed to being self-contained or self-generating. While having enduring orientations, civilisations are not path-dependent or bound to an initial cultural programme. In this way, drawing from the work of Benjamin Nelson (1981), Arnason breaks from the strongly culturalist assumptions of Weber's concept of civilisation as essentially a model of the idea of culture, where culture is seen as a self-contained and fairly homogenous order of values. Although Eisenstadt recognised the importance of civilisational encounters, it played a lesser role in an analysis that placed the defining core of civilisations on their different departures from the world religions that consolidated in the Axial Age. However, the problem of path-dependency cannot be entirely jettisoned, without compromising the coherence of the notion of civilisation. At some point in the history of a given constellation of elements, a degree of path-dependency does take shape, at least in the form of a common starting point (see Arjomand's contribution to this issue).

The proponents of civilisational analysis see civilisations as open to innovations due to their essential creativity and mutual encounters. They are not settled for once and for all. Indeed, in many cases there may be major disputes or divisions within civilisations, as illustrated by the example of doctrinal disputes within Christianity. While being defined by certain 'structures of consciousness,' to use Nelson's term, civilisations are also networks of power that have a material basis. However, they are not reducible to societies. National societies are to be seen as singularisations of civilizational patterns and thus need to be placed in a broader framework of analysis. This is perhaps the characteristic feature of the particular kind of comparative historical sociology fostered by civilisational analysis: societies are already linked due to their participation in a civilisational context. This leaves somewhat unanswered the question of whether some civilisations also take the form of national societies, such as Japan or China.

While civilisational analysis highlights the critical role played by civilisational encounters, there is also the question of intra-civilisational routes and encounters. The pluralistic nature of civilisations makes them internally varied. This is particularly pertinent in the case of European civilisation and the Islamic world. Islam hardly constitutes a civilisation in itself, even if it provided the essential cultural reference points for several variations. This is also the case of Europe, which cannot be said to consist of one civilisation but several. There are clearly some difficulties about what defines the basic core of civilisations if they are to contain variations. However, Arnason resolves this problem by recourse to an interpretative perspective that owes much to Merleau-Ponty and Castoriadis: civilisations are based on interpretative capacities; they are 'ways of articulating the world' around world-images and involve imaginary projections.

I would like to conclude this discussion of civilisational analysis by pointing out four problems with its approach. I see these as problems rather than

objections as such. The first is the problem of variation and singularity. If civilisations are characterised by a high degree of variation due to their internal difference, what then gives to them their basic singularity? This is all the more problematic if there is not a primary cultural core to civilisations. Presumably there are limits to the degree to which variation can be taken. However, this requires some notion of path dependency to which the theory is committed. Nonetheless, the problem still remains. For example, should Europe and Asia be replaced by the notion of the unity of Eurasia? Where would this leave the notion of civilisation?

The second problem is a related one of how much explanatory force can be given to the capacity of civilisational orientations to determine over the long term enduring continuities. This is especially a problem with Eisenstadt's use of the term 'Axial Age', which gives too much weight to the emergence of the world religions to account for the course of history. In view of the fact that the history of most societies and civilisations is characterised by major points of rupture, how much weight should be given to continuity? Civilisational analysis is required to compromise rupture to accommodate a strong thesis of continuity. The emergence of civilisations were undoubtedly—after the Neolithic revolution that saw the emergence of farming—the most significant development in the early history of human societies, but their long-term significance cannot be so important when it comes to the lineages of development in the modern era. The only solution to this problem is to downplay modernity. But this is a case of throwing out the baby with the bathwater.

The third problem concerns the place of the present. Civilisational analysis sees modernity—in all its variants—as the outcome of civilisational trajectories. The multiple forms that modernity takes bears the imprint of civilisational origins. The difficulty with this is not that civilisational orientations influence the form that modernity takes, but that the present is given reduced significance. It is difficult to reduce the major characteristics of contemporary societies to civilisational structures. The question then is what is the contribution of civilisational analysis to the analysis of contemporary society? It is not apparent, for example, that many social and political struggles—anti-capitalist protests, environmental movements—are primarily civilisational in character or whether the civilisational characteristics are the most salient ones. It is true of course that Eisenstadt has overcome this problem with the argument that modernity is a new kind of civilisation. This is a debate, which I cannot address here.

The fourth problem—the chief concern of this essay—is that civilisational analysis, as one of the most important developments within comparative historical sociology since the early 1990s, has not clarified its relationship with transnationalism. The place of transnational connections continues to occupy a minor place. While it is indeed true that Arnason has stressed the importance of the inter-civilisational dimension, this is largely a corrective to an older and

more normative conception of civilisations as singular. Whether or not this is a problem is undoubtedly a matter of what weight we give to transnationalism and to the interconnected nature of the world, as signalled by the notion of entangled history. It is clear that contemporary transnational history as well as much of global history has taken the strong view that the fabric of social existence is constituted by such links and that civilisations are constituted by interactions. It would appear that for civilisational analysis such interactions are rather more of the order of influences than major formative factors.

There are other problems, which I will not consider, such as the very fundamental problem of taking the very notion of a civilisation—which in general derives from the European and Asian historical traditions—and applying it to the very different historical experiences of the southern hemisphere (see Aurea Mota's contribution to this volume). Notwithstanding these problems, civilisational analysis is to be credited with developing and applying an interpretative approach to sociological inquiry that offers an alternative to purely historical analysis.

### **The Future of Comparative Historical Sociology**

Comparative history since the recent interest in transnationalism has undergone both crisis as well as renewal. The presuppositions and nature of comparative analysis have been challenged by notions of entanglement and transnationalism. The historians may have a problem with the nature of comparison if everything is now supposed to be either entangled or—the other extreme—due to the Eurocentric presuppositions of scholarship, it is no longer possible to discuss non-western societies using the language of comparison. Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000) has provided the most robust rejoinder to the latter challenge. Yet, while comparison is potentially able to add rather than detract from global and transnational history, it has not yet been fully worked out how this might be possible. This is less because of the problems of the comparative approach than of a weak theorisation of transnationalism, which unlike comparison is not only a method of analysis but it is also a theory of society in so far as it is linked to a wider theory of the interconnected nature of societies.

In contrast, the situation in historical sociology in so far as it can be separated from historical analysis is different but ambivalent. There the comparative dimension continues relatively unscathed,<sup>6</sup> but the full implications of the shift to the transnational have not had a major impact. Despite considerable cross-fertilisation, as in the work of Osterhammel (2014) and Chakrabarty (2000), there has also been relatively little interaction between global history and historical sociology.<sup>7</sup>

However, the crisis of historical sociology is only superficially the case, since as argued above, historians remain largely concerned with the past and have not replaced the need for an interpretation of the present and its futures.

Indeed, much of global history is a product of imperial history and the making of the modern world through colonialism. One of the distinguishing features of historical sociology, in contrast, is that it strives to address the present in relation to the future and is better equipped to offer a theory of society. The analysis of long-term trends is thus a key feature of historical sociology, which is less concerned with the differences than with convergences over time. But still it seems that the full implications of the transnational analysis have been missed in historical sociology at a time when it is being embraced more fully by other disciplines, such as anthropology, which is rediscovering history and transnationalism (see for example Trouillot, 2003). The concerns of civilisational analysis foreground other issues and the approach tends to obscure rather than clarify the implications for the present.

Yet, there are grounds of optimism. The theoretical premises of comparative historical sociology offer a sound basis on which the field can develop. I am not convinced that the focus on civilisations is the only way, though the role of civilisational factors cannot be excluded in any long-term analysis.<sup>8</sup> The strong role that the interactionist and interpretative perspective has in the work of Arnason has the potential to offer a more developed theoretical underpinning of the notion of transnational connections, which is often theoretically undeveloped in the work of historians. Although this perspective is tied to the presuppositions of the civilisational framework, which tends to presuppose civilisations as somehow existing prior to their interactions, it does have the potential for a more radical application. Coupled with the interpretative perspective, it points to a considerably more pluralised approach to historical processes and the analysis of the ways in which the past has a bearing on the present. This is also clearly demonstrated in the work of William Sewell (2005).

It is in this regard that there is considerable shared ground with history, and especially with conceptual history. Both conceptual history—in its various traditions, including those of Foucault, Koselleck, White, and Skinner—and the historical sociology of Arnason and Wagner have in common a strongly interpretative dimension, which is entirely compatible with the comparative approach. However, the implications of transnationalism are less clearly developed than they are in the relatively new field of global intellectual history (Moyn and Sartori 2013).

What is in need of greater clarification is the nature of the sociological in historical sociology. Too often it is the historical that is emphasised, with the result that historical sociology loses its specificity. What then is needed? What does the sociological dimension in historical analysis add?

The distinguishing feature of comparative historical sociology is the concern with macro-sociological theorising, in particular the intersection of social agency, time and structure. As with sociological reasoning generally, historical sociology approaches a given unit or event by placing it in a larger context,

as well as offering a longer-run analysis that includes addressing the open horizon of the future. Historians operate with shorter time frames and with more circumscribed topics. As Sewell (2005) has perceptively commented, historians also tend to narrate their way through conceptual difficulties with the result that temporal dynamics about causation get lost in narrative detail (see also Maier, 2000).

One of the challenges for historical sociology is to develop new theoretical approaches that address more fully the long-term historical significance of social action and its impact on structure-forming effects. In this structure is probably the most in need of development. Concepts such as civilisation are specifically concepts of structure in that they refer to durable configurations that persist over time. Historical sociology is about understanding how such social actors construct through their action and interpretations of the world new structures or change existing ones. It is thus ultimately about the explanation of social, economic, cultural and political structures as constructed or generated by social action and having transformative effects over time. It is this that brings the concerns of comparative historical sociology to the present. Unlike the historian, the historical sociologist seeks to explain the present and to discern future possibilities. Foucault was, like Weber, essentially a historical sociologist with his method of writing a 'history of the present.' There are some important exceptions, such as Hartog's major work on 'regimes of historicity', which may be another example of historians taking the lead; although in this case the approach is not without its problems when it comes to the analysis of the present day (Hartog 2015).

The real challenge for comparative historical sociology is to embrace more fully the implications of transnationalism and to do so without giving up on comparison. As I have argued, transnationalism has had a transformative impact on global history. Comparative historical sociology is still tied to the concerns of an older conception of how the modern world was formed. Despite the depth of analysis that one finds in civilisational theory, the account of the formation of the modern world is too rooted in a northern-hemisphere perspective and one that does not fully embrace transnational linkages. The modern world did not simply spring forth from the old civilisations, but from their ruins and from many networks, global linkages, the flows of not just peoples, but ideas and culture more generally. One of the most promising lines of inquiry for comparative historical sociology, which would bring comparative analysis onto a new level more generally, would be to address the transnational in terms of entanglements rather than in terms of endogenous factors. This needs to be done in a way that overcomes one of the major problems with the established comparative approaches, namely the tension between looking at the units in question as separate—as already formed endogenously and thus as separate—or as connected and thus to be explained by exogenous factors. What transnational and global analysis draws attention

to is the logic by which spatial and temporal entities are formed. In this view, then, the comparative task is to look at different modes of entanglement. The concept of entanglement itself needs to be developed to show what both precedes it and what is produced as a result of entanglements. The following can only be a brief outline of a possible future direction for comparative historical sociology to embrace more fully the transnational challenge.

Entanglements arise as a result of prior spatial and temporal processes interacting. This does not always or necessarily lead to their entanglement. Where this occurs a condition arises whereby the histories of different worlds become irreversibly linked. A further outcome is the creation of hybrid worlds in which the previous entities lose their separateness and the entanglement generates new entities, which may not necessarily be entirely new societies, but might be manifest in the formation of new socio-cultural imaginaries and in other structures. The notion of modernity—and too, but much more problematically—the notion of civilisation, highlights such transformations in the spatial and temporal structures of societies. There is considerable scope for a global and comparative historical sociology of the modern world that is addressed to the analysis of such phenomena, a characteristic of which is that they are all products of the transnational intermingling of societies.

### Conclusion

The essay has argued that historical sociology, with its rich background in classical sociology and in world history, needs to re-embrace transnationalism if it is to be of major relevance to the analysis of current times. The interpretative tradition within historical sociology, as represented in the work of Johann Arnason and Peter Wagner, offers a sound basis on which to develop a comparative historical sociology of what is now a fully transnationalised world. In this respect the concern with modernity probably offers a more promising prospect than the notion of civilisation. There are undoubtedly great challenges in this for comparison as a method of analysis. In order to develop this perspective, more emphasis will need to be given to transnationalism which, as proposed in this essay, also needs to be theorised in light of new ideas about how social realities are generated.

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### **Notes**

- 1 I refer to Norbert Elias's complaint of sociology 'retreating into the present' (Elias 1987).
- 2 See Hunt (2014), Karakani (2014), Rosenberg (2012, 2014), Sachsenmaier (2011).
- 3 See Moyn and Sartori (2013) for a recent contribution on global intellectual history.
- 4 This too is the case with Heinrich Winkler's three-volume *Geschichte des Westens* (2011, 2014, 2015).
- 5 See also Aromand (2015), Arjomand and Tiryakian (2004), Arjomand and Reis (2013).
- 6 For example, the well-known volume by Mahoney and Rueschemeyer (2003) does not distinguish between historians and sociologists. This is also the case with the work of Mann, Tilly, and Sewell for example.
- 7 See the volume edited by Adams et al (2005), which contains chapters that seek precisely to remedy this *deficit*. See also Bhambra (2009).
- 8 I have argued this in Delanty (2013), where I have proposed the notion of European civilisation as an 'inter-civilisational constellation'.