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MARC BLOCH AND THE LOGIC OF COMPARATIVE HISTORY

WILLIAM H. SEWELL, JR.

This article is an attempt to set forth the logic of the comparative method and to indicate how this method can be used in historical research. It is based on an examination of the works of Marc Bloch, who was one of the most eminent craftsmen ever to work in the genre of comparative history, and whose article published in 1928 under the title "Pour une histoire comparée des sociétés européennes"¹ is still one of the most intelligent and compelling theoretical treatments of the subject. Because of Bloch's wide range of interests and his sensitivity to philosophical and theoretical problems of history, his work raises many of the important questions about the nature, uses, and limits of comparative history.

THE USES OF COMPARATIVE HISTORY

Bloch's espousal of the comparative method is a counterpart of his belief that history cannot be intelligible unless it can "succeed in establishing explanatory relationships between phenomena."² The comparative method is essentially a tool for dealing with problems of explanation. Although Bloch uses the comparative method for a number of distinct purposes and in different contexts, a single logic — a logic which Bloch himself never explicitly states — underlies these various uses. This is the logic of hypothesis testing. If an historian attributes the appearance of phenomenon A in one society to the existence of condition B, he can check this hypothesis by trying to find other societies where A occurs without B or vice versa. If he finds no cases which contradict the hypothesis, his confidence in its validity will increase, the

1. *Revue de synthèse historique* 46 (1925), 15-50. The article appears in English translation (without footnotes) as "Toward a Comparative History of European Societies," in Fredric C. Lane and Jelle C. Riemersma, eds., *Enterprise and Secular Change* (Homewood, Ill., 1953), 494-521. I am unable to do full justice to Bloch's article here, but it should be read by anyone interested in comparative history. Among its other virtues, it gives a number of excellent and detailed illustrations of the use of the comparative method in practice.

2. *The Historian's Craft* [1949] (New York, 1962), 10.

level of his confidence depending upon the number and variety of comparisons made. If he finds contradictory cases, he will either reject the hypothesis outright or reformulate and refine it so as to take into account the contradictory evidence and then subject it again to comparative testing. By such a process of testing, reformulating, and retesting, he will construct explanations which satisfy him as convincing and accurate. Whether employed by historians or by social scientists, the comparative method is an adaptation of experimental logic to investigations in which actual experimentation is impossible. The comparative method, like the experimental method, is a means of systematically gathering evidence to test the validity of our explanations.

Bloch realized that the comparative method could be used in this way to test explanatory hypotheses, but for him this was only one of three equally important uses; the comparative method could also be used to discover the uniqueness of different societies and to formulate problems for historical research. What Bloch never recognized was that these three uses of comparative method, while distinct in *purpose*, share a common *logic*, the logic of hypothesis testing.

Bloch makes frequent use of the comparative method in assessing the validity of explanatory hypotheses. The following three examples should make clear both the logic of this use and its value for historical scholarship.

1) In his article on gold in the Middle Ages, Bloch uses the comparative method to determine why Florence and Genoa were the first principalities in medieval Europe to issue gold coins. Historians commonly attribute the priority of these two cities to their vast wealth and to the rapid growth of their economies in the preceding century or so. Bloch, however, by using comparison, demonstrates that this explanation is insufficient; Venice, as he points out, was at least as rich, but began coining gold some three decades after Florence. The real reason for the priority of Florence and Genoa was that they had favorable trade balances with the Orient. Genoa and Florence exported cloth to the Levant and were paid in gold, which accumulated in the cities' treasuries. Venice, on the other hand, had an equally profitable but more traditional trading relationship with the Levant; Venetian merchants paid for oriental products in gold and exchanged them in the interior of Italy for silver. Venice failed to accumulate gold, and therefore was not able to issue gold coins.³ Bloch's use of the comparative method in this example fits perfectly the logic set out above. He uses comparison to demonstrate the insufficiency of one explanatory hypothesis, and then formulates a new hypothesis consistent with his comparative evidence: that the priority of Florence and

3. "Le problème d'or au Moyen Age," *Annales d'histoire économique et sociale* (1933), 25.

Genoa is explained by their favorable balance of trade rather than by their over-all wealth.

2) In his theoretical article on comparative history, Bloch points out that any historian who cites purely local factors to explain the rise of estates in one French province in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries will be certain to make mistakes. The adoption of a comparative framework, however, will demonstrate the insufficiency of such "local pseudo-causes." This is true because the same centuries saw the rise of estates in many French provinces, and of the French *Etats Généraux*, the German *Stände*, the Italian *Parliamenti*, and the Spanish *Cortes*. Since "a general phenomenon must have equally general causes," comparison undermines the purely local explanations.⁴

3) The comparative method works equally well in invalidating incorrect hypotheses which posit general explanations. For example, in a review in the *Annales d'histoire économique et sociale*, Bloch makes note of one scholar's argument that the disappearance of mortgage holding by ecclesiastical establishments in Normandy at the end of the twelfth century was a result of doctrinal prohibitions against the taking of usury. But, as Bloch points out, an article by Hans van Werweke shows that religious establishments in the Low Countries held mortgages as late as the end of the thirteenth century. "In permitting comparison, indispensable to the discovery of causes, the researches of Mr. van Werweke ruin this interpretation." The cause turns out to be a difference between the economies of the two regions, not religious doctrines against the taking of usury.⁵ Here a *general* "pseudo-cause" is undermined by comparison and replaced by a local true cause.

These three examples make clear the great importance of the comparative method for Bloch or for any other historian who is interested in explanation. The adoption of a comparative framework enables us to detect errors or inadequacies in hypothetical explanations which would seem unimpeachable if viewed in one single historical or geographical setting.

Bloch's second use of the comparative method is to discover the uniqueness of different societies. Unless an historian places a study in its proper comparative setting, he will have no idea whether developments he is investigating are peculiar to that society or are part of a much broader movement. As Bloch states in the introduction to *Les caractères originaux de l'histoire rurale française*,

Without first glancing at France, how can one grasp in their singularity the developments peculiar to the diverse regions? And in its turn, the French movement only takes on its true meaning when envisaged on a European plane.⁶

4. "Toward a Comparative History of European Societies," 504-506 and 519.

5. *Annales d'histoire économique et sociale* (1930), 597.

6. *Les caractères originaux de l'histoire rurale française* [1931] (Paris, 1960), I, viii.

The purpose of this use of comparison is clearly different from hypothesis testing, but its logic is identical. Comparison to discover uniqueness is in fact the obverse of comparison to invalidate "local pseudo-causes." Placing a study in a comparative framework not only invalidates purely local explanations for what are in fact general phenomena, but also separates out those phenomena which are genuine peculiarities of the locality, phenomena which, of course, will have to be explained by local conditions.

Bloch's third use of the comparative method, formulating problems for historical research, is also based on the logic of hypothesis testing. To illustrate this use, Bloch shows how the comparative method enabled him to discover an enclosure movement in Southern France in the fifteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth centuries. He was able to make this discovery, which had eluded other scholars, because he was familiar with research on the English enclosures of the same period, and suspected an analogous development in France.⁷ Bloch does not indicate specifically why his knowledge of English enclosures led him to suspect French enclosures, but clearly it was because the two countries had similar patterns of agricultural organization, and, more specifically, because the factors which are usually cited as the cause of the English enclosures, namely the difficulty manorial lords experienced in maintaining their incomes during a period of rapid inflation, the possibility of producing crops for the market at a sizeable profit, and the existence of technological innovations which could only be applied in enclosed fields, were equally true of France. Thus, although Bloch apparently did not realize it, the logic of this comparison is the same as it would be if we were trying to test our explanatory hypotheses about the causes of English enclosures; if the causes adduced to explain the English development are the true causes, then, since the alleged causes are found in France as well as in England, France must have had some sort of development similar to that of England. In this case, of course, we were more interested in discovering the *fact* that France had an enclosure movement, but the logic of the comparative method is the same whatever our purpose may have been.

UNITS OF COMPARISON

A clear understanding of the logic of the comparative method can help us to clear up a certain vagueness on Bloch's part about determining the proper units of comparison. Bloch denounces the common assumption that the term comparative history can be used only for comparisons between different nations or states,⁸ and concludes that we must "abandon obsolete topographical

7. "Toward a Comparative History of European Societies," 498-501.

8. *Ibid.*, 498.

compartments in which we pretend to enclose social realities. . . . For each aspect of European social life, in each historical instant, the appropriate geographical framework has to be found."⁹ But this injunction, correct as far as it goes, gives us no formula for determining the boundaries of our units of comparison, and nowhere does Bloch provide us with such a formula. This vagueness can lead to serious logical difficulties, as it does in an example Bloch uses:

If I study the landholding system of the Limousin region, for instance, I will constantly compare fragments of evidence drawn from the records of this or that seigneurie. This is comparison in the common sense of the word, but, nevertheless, I do not think that I engage here in what is, technically speaking, comparative history: for the various objects of my study are all derived from parts of the same society, a society which in its totality forms one large unit.¹⁰

Surely Bloch, with his highly developed sensitivity to regional variations, would not say that all parts of Limousin are identical. What is to keep us from taking some smaller portion of the region and calling it the unit of society? For that matter, surely no two seigneuries are exactly alike; it would be possible to define each seigneurie as a society different from others. But there would be no point in doing so unless it would facilitate our testing of some hypothesis.

How the units are to be delimited depends on the explanatory problem we are addressing. Let us say I am interested in the cultivation of demesnes in Limousin, and I find that among the seigneuries whose documents I am examining all the ecclesiastical seigneuries employed a paid, legally free official to supervise the cultivation of the demesne, while lay seigneuries used an unpaid serf for such supervision.¹¹ I will begin to feel that I have found an interesting feature of the management of ecclesiastical estates which needs explaining. To discover the cause of this practice, I will try to identify peculiarities of ecclesiastical seigneuries which could explain it. Then, having formulated some hypothetical explanation, I will make a systematic comparison of ecclesiastical and lay seigneuries both in Limousin and elsewhere in France, to see if my explanation will stand up. But let us say that, when reading the same documents, what strikes me is not the difference between the method of management of ecclesiastical and lay seigneuries, but the fact that some seigneuries had very large demesnes and others had very small ones. I also note that all the seigneuries with large demesnes seem to be in one region, and those with small ones in another. Now I will try to explain the difference between the two patterns by peculiarities of the terrain, soil, types

9. *Ibid.*, 518.

10. *Ibid.*, 496.

11. This example is entirely hypothetical, and is used only for its illustrative value. I make no claims for its accuracy, or even for its plausibility.

of crops grown, and so forth of the two regions, and having formulated hypotheses, I will make a systematic comparison of seigneuries in the two regions, and in comparable regions outside Limousin, to see whether my hypothetical causal factors can in fact explain the observed difference. In these two cases, the units of comparison are different. In the first case I take ecclesiastical and lay seigneuries as my units of comparison, and in the second case, I take two geographical regions as my units. Neither of these two ways of dividing Limousin is *in itself* more legitimate than the other; each is more appropriate for the particular problem at hand. If I want to explain the peculiarities of estate management of ecclesiastical seigneuries, the first division is the only one which makes sense. If I want to explain regional differences in the size of the demesne, then only the second makes sense.

Our example thus suggests some elaborations on Bloch's rules about the units of comparison. First, *the units to be used in an inquiry will vary not only with the aspect of social life being studied and with the "historical instant," but also with the particular explanatory hypothesis we are trying to test by our comparison.* For example, in our hypothetical study of a *single aspect* of Limousin, the cultivation of demesnes, we had to use two different sets of units of comparison for the two different explanatory problems. And second, *the units to be used for comparison need not be geographical units.* In our Limousin example one of the comparisons we made was between ecclesiastical and lay seigneuries. Now ecclesiastical and lay seigneuries are likely to be found scattered about at random throughout the region; both may exist even in the same village. What we are comparing in this case are different institutions, not different "topographical compartments." Perhaps the best way to state this rule is to say that comparisons must be between different *social systems*. As sociologists use the term, social system can designate social aggregates ranging all the way from a single family to the whole of human civilization. If we say that comparisons must be between different social systems, then comparisons between nations, institutions, voluntary associations, families, cities, or civilizations are all equally legitimate, depending on the purpose of the investigation.

One difficulty with this new formulation is that since no two phenomena are exactly alike, there is no theoretical limit on how small and insignificant the units of comparison can become. Even insignificant differences between insignificant units can be explained by using the comparative method. But this is no peculiarity of comparative history; any historian can choose to study an insignificant problem. The comparative method is not magic. It can be used to explain phenomena of all degrees of importance. The choice of the phenomena to be explained is the responsibility of the historian, not of the comparative method.

These rules about units of comparison have some important consequences

for the practice of comparative history. In the first place, they should enable us to avoid a serious fault found in many attempts to write comparative history: the use of an inflexible comparative framework. For example, if we wish to make a comparative study of British and German imperialism, we will not feel bound to make comparisons only between the British and German imperial experiences. If we find that we can understand some aspects of British imperialism better by comparing the British experience with that of France or even that of Ancient Rome, we will do so. In short, we will expect that *within any given historical study, different comparative frameworks will be appropriate for different problems*. In the second place, the rules force us to reject the common assumption that a study must focus on two or more societies to be a work of comparative history. A history of a *single* nation can be comparative history if comparison is used in formulating problems and if explanations of developments in that nation are tested by the comparative method. The comparisons will sometimes be between different regions of the nation, sometimes between different institutions, sometimes between that nation and others, sometimes between yet other social systems, depending on the explanatory problem. In fact, Bloch supplies one of the best examples of this kind of comparative history in *Les caractères originaux de l'histoire rurale française*. And finally, we will be able to avoid one of the most common shortcomings of comparative historical studies: the tendency to juxtapose without real comparison two separate studies of parallel developments in two different societies. If our units of comparison depend upon the explanatory hypothesis we are testing, then *there is no point in adopting a comparative framework at all unless some explanatory problem is being addressed*.

THE LIMITS OF COMPARATIVE HISTORY

In his theoretical article on comparative history, Bloch warned that the comparative method "is not capable of solving everything,"¹² but he never systematically examined the limits of comparative history. He was intent on demonstrating the valuable services of the comparative method to a generation of historians unfamiliar with its use. In our day, when comparative history is the object of widespread and somewhat uncritical praise, an examination of its limits is more to the point.

Bloch does suggest one limit by arguing that a rigorous and critical use of the comparative method is possible only if we are making comparisons between societies which are geographical neighbors and historical contemporaries. Comparison of societies far removed from each other in space and time, which he stigmatizes as "comparative method in the grand manner,"

12. "Toward a Comparative History of European Societies," 495.

is not without value for some purposes, but it is too imprecise to be of much use "from the scientific point of view." Comparison of societies which are historical contemporaries, which influence each other constantly and which have common origins, is "altogether different" from and much more promising than "comparison in the grand manner," and is capable of giving us much more solid results.¹³

But this alleged limit of the comparative method does not stand up very well under scrutiny. It is hard to adduce any very forceful argument for calling these two types of historical comparisons "altogether different." The same logic is used in the two types of comparisons, and Bloch himself admits in a footnote that both kinds of comparisons can be used to solve the same kinds of historical problems.¹⁴ The only advantage of comparing societies close to each other in space and time is that such societies, largely because they influence each other constantly, are likely to be more similar than societies which are far removed from each other. Consequently, the experimental condition of "all other factors being equal" is likely to be more nearly achieved. For example, when we explain the coining of gold in Florence and Genoa before Venice by differences in their balances of trade with the Orient, we can be reasonably confident, because of the similarities in the cultures and economies of the cities, that there are no other differences which might in fact cause gold to be coined later in Venice. If we compared Florence and Genoa to thirteenth-century Peking or nineteenth-century England, this would no longer be the case.

Mere temporal and spatial proximity, however, does not assure similarity, and some societies which are very remote from one another are surely more alike, at least in ways that are crucial for some explanatory problems, than some neighboring societies. For example, few would deny that in a study of industrialization, comparisons between Germany and Japan could be as illuminating as comparisons between Germany and Austria. Of course, whether societies which are remote from one another can be used profitably in comparative historical inquiries is another facet of the problem of appropriate units of comparison, and there is no reason why the same rule cannot be used for all facets of the problem. While we must be more careful when dealing with social systems which are remote from each other in space and time, *we should use for comparison whatever social systems will be useful in determining the validity of our hypotheses*. In short, it is more appropriate to warn historians of the potential pitfalls of comparisons between remote societies than to try to limit their comparisons to chronological and geographical neighbors.

Just as the use of the comparative method cannot be limited to studies of

13. *Ibid.*, 496-498.

14. "Pour une histoire comparée des sociétés européennes," 19.

chronological and geographical neighbors, neither can it be limited to certain fields of history. Whether the comparative method will be useful depends not on the field of history, but on the type of problem being addressed. Bloch's theoretical article was entitled "Toward a Comparative History of European Societies," and most of the examples used in this article to illustrate his use of the comparative method have been taken from what would usually be called social and economic history. But Bloch also applies it to intellectual history in *Les rois thaumaturges* (Strasbourg, 1924) which is a comparative study of the development of ideas about supernatural power of kings in medieval England and France, and to political history in *La société féodale* (1939) where he uses comparison in his treatment of feudal institutions of government. In both of these examples, and in every other case where Bloch uses the comparative method, he is dealing with explanatory problems transcending the boundaries of any single social system. Given the observations we have made about the uses of comparative method and the choice of units of comparison, this is exactly what we should expect. *The comparative method can be used by any kind of historian interested in explaining phenomena which occur in two or more social systems.* In some fields, as for example political or intellectual history, such problems may arise less frequently than in economic or social history, but all present them to some extent, and all can thus be usefully treated by the comparative method. The comparative method would be indispensable, for instance, to a study of the rise of Romanticism in Europe in the nineteenth century or of fascist movements in the first half of the twentieth century.

Thus we find that the real limit of the comparative method is that it can be applied only to certain types of problems, not that some fields cannot use it. As we have seen, the comparative method is useful only when we are attempting to explain more or less general phenomena. But even this limitation must be qualified, because the comparative method can be used for certain aspects of explanations of single, particular events. Let us say, for example, that an historian of a labor union is trying to explain why the union membership voted to go on strike on a particular occasion. On this occasion, the workers were hesitant to strike, because they feared that this strike, like the long and unsuccessful one they had called the year before, would be a failure and would only impoverish them further by cutting off their source of income for weeks or even months. However, since business was very brisk, and the firm was having trouble meeting all its orders, a strike seemed to have very good prospects of success. Besides, the majority of the union's leaders favored a strike, and, most importantly, one leader who opposed the strike, and who was extremely popular and a masterful orator, was ill on the day of the membership meeting and could not attend. Because of this unique

pattern of circumstances, the workers, after a long and stormy session, voted by a narrow margin to go on strike.

Our historian has explained the outcome of the vote by showing how this particular balance of forces led to this particular outcome; and we could never find another situation enough like this one to perform any sort of comparative "experiment." Yet even in this case the comparative method can be used. The explanation of this particular event is in fact a particular combination of more general explanatory statements: "union members will be hesitant to strike if they have recently lost a long and costly strike," "a strike is more likely to succeed if the firm being struck is having trouble meeting orders," "in this union the members tend to vote for positions favored by their leaders," and "the absent leader was capable of influencing member's votes." The first two of these explanatory statements can be applied to unions other than the one under study, and since they apply to more than one social system, they can be tested by comparison. The final two explanatory statements apply only to one social system — the union under study — and therefore the comparative method cannot be used to test them, although they can perhaps be tested by a systematic study of other votes taken by the union. In any given historical study many of the explanatory statements which are combined to make a particular explanation may be so generally accepted that they will not be subjected to systematic testing, that is, they may be taken as assumptions. But if these assumptions are challenged, they must be tested, either by the comparative method or by whatever other method is appropriate.

However, the most important limit of the comparative method is not that it can be applied only when we are trying to explain phenomena which transcend the boundary of any single social system, but that it aids us only in one step, and that the easiest and most mundane step, of the explanatory process. *The comparative method is a method, a set of rules which can be methodically and systematically applied in gathering and using evidence to test explanatory hypotheses. It does not supply us with explanations to be subjected to test: this is a task for the historical imagination.* It requires insight, sympathy, and intellectual power, qualities which are quite independent of the historian's command of the comparative method, to grasp the patterns and work out the logic which underlie sequences of historical events. The comparative method can in some cases supplement the historical imagination, as for instance when Bloch used it to bring to light the enclosure movement in Southern France. But the comparative method is never a substitute for historical imagination; it is a servant which must be put at its command.

The comparative method is, then, subject to certain limits. But within these limits it is of undeniable value. As Bloch remarked in *The Historian's Craft*, the same historians who carry on their research with endless care and criticism

when trying to establish the existence of an historical fact are often satisfied with any semblance of an explanation when they try to find out why it occurred.¹⁵ This unfortunate habit could be largely cured if historians would, whenever possible, subject their explanations to comparative testing. A clear understanding of the logic and uses of the comparative method would force historians to deal consciously and precisely with explanatory problems they now often treat in a rather cavalier manner.

Finally, this article has been a discussion of the use of the comparative method in history, and it is important to realize that the term comparative history can have other meanings. One of these meanings is comparative perspective, that is, viewing historical problems in a context broader than their particular social, geographical, and temporal setting. The comparative perspective is not subject to the same limits as the comparative method, but, by the same token, its application cannot be reduced to a set of simple rules which can be methodically used to solve certain specified historical problems. The comparative perspective reduces our biases by presenting us with alternative systems of values and world views, and by imparting to us a sense of the richness and variety of human experience; it provides us not with rules, but with *insights*. A comparative perspective thus is valuable even to historians who can make no use of the comparative method.

However, when most historians use the term comparative history they mean neither the comparative method nor the comparative perspective, but comparative history as *subject matter*: that is, studies which make systematic comparisons between two or more societies and present their results in a comparative format. Of course nearly all such studies use comparative method and perspective, but it is important not to restrict the term to so confined a use. Otherwise historians whose subject matter is narrower will feel that comparative history has nothing to offer them. In view of the valuable aid that both the comparative method and the comparative perspective can render to all historians, this would be a serious mistake.

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15. *The Historian's Craft*, 195.