

Histoire Croisée: A Relational Process-Based Approach

Bénédicte Zimmermann

Globalisation makes understanding worldmaking processes crucial. During the Cold War the social sciences mainly addressed this issue through comparative studies that mirrored the logic of the world-historical confrontation. In this respect 1989 fostered not only a political turn but an epistemological one. Beyond comparison, the new political situation fuelled the development of approaches dedicated to the study of relations and interdependencies between different parts of the world.

Like entangled, shared or connected histories,¹ *Histoire croisée* takes a cross-border perspective.² These approaches have in common that they shift the analysis from comparative methods centred on territorial entities, or any other predefined units, to the relationships that flow through and the interactions that constitute them, as well as moving away from approaches solely focused on state relationships. Dedicated to the study of intersecting processes in various settings, *Histoire croisée* is driven by an empirical, methodological and epistemological shift that involves redefining the object of research.

A double shift: from comparison and transfer studies to *Histoire croisée*

Comparison consists of contrasting different though preferably equivalent entities and showing differences and similarities so as to highlight a common question or problem. The scale of comparison is decisive; it consists in choosing a focal point that, for

the sake of symmetry, should be identical for each of the entities under study. Whether the comparison takes place at a sub-national or supra-national level, whether it favours a micro or macro scale, it usually takes as its starting point those traditional academic categories and facts that are historically and nationally formatted and thus lead to a methodological nationalism that deciphers and writes the story of the Other in light of the researcher's own national tradition.³ From this aporia is born the space for *Histoire croisée*, which allows for the study, among others, of the processes involved in the constitution of categories and objects of comparison as well as the transformations that result from their relationship.

Histoire croisée is born from the blind spots inherent in comparative methods. One blind spot of particular concern is the interaction between the objects of comparison. When societies are in contact with each other, even through loose ties such as those created by virtual networks, then objects and practices are not only interrelated but modify each other as an effect of that relationship. This is often the case in science and innovation, where disciplines and paradigms develop and change through the process of mutual exchange; it is also true for cultural activities such as literature, music and the fine arts as well as in practical areas such as advertising, marketing, technology, trade and even social policy. It is further true for worldwide architecture competitions. Yet comparative studies

are ill-equipped to grasp these contact areas, the mutual interaction that may develop from them and the transformations that may result.

Transfer studies were among the first in Europe to highlight these aporia of comparison and try to overcome them.⁴ Yet they limit their scope to particular forms of circulation. With their focus on transactions between two poles, transfers imply a fixed frame of reference that includes a point of departure and a point of arrival. In the case of transnational exchanges these points are generally located within national societies and cultures that are in contact with each other. Consequently the initial situation and that resulting from the transfer are apprehended through stable national frames of reference assumed to be well known, for instance 'German' or 'French' historiography. Although the original purpose of transfer studies was to discredit the myth of the homogeneity of national units by showing their permeability, the analytic categories actually bring back into play the very national references that were to be questioned. Hence rather than vitiating the national grounding, most of them paradoxically strengthen it. Lastly, most transfer studies miss the issue of reciprocity and reversibility. They generally analyse simple linear processes from one culture to another with the understanding that what counts are phenomena of introduction, transmission and reception. But the situation is often more complex, bringing into play the interaction between various points that may engender new dynamics.

Inspired by the shift in perspective initiated by transfer studies, *Histoire croisée* engages in a second shift from transfers to interpenetration and intercrossing. In so doing it makes no claim to replacing either transfers or comparison but rather takes up lines of inquiry and processes that are inaccessible to those approaches and thus makes its focus a study of circulation and interaction processes and their outcomes.

Intercrossings: another way of constructing the research object

In the literal sense, to cross means 'to place or fold crosswise one over the other.'⁵ This creates a point of intersection where events may occur that affect the involved elements to varying degrees depending on their resistance, permeability, malleability and environment. Accordingly, research entities and objects are not considered merely in relation to each other, but also through one another in terms of relationships, interactions and what those interactions produce. The understanding that something occurs in the intercrossing process is one of the basic assumptions of *Histoire croisée*. It pays particular attention to the analysis of resistances, inertia, shifts in trajectory, form and content, and of new combinations that may develop through intercrossing. The aim is to grasp the complexity of a composite, plural world in motion and thereby develop tools for addressing the fundamental question of change – for change is a weak point, if not a blind spot, in most comparative approaches and to some extent in transfer studies.⁶

The relational, interactive and processual character of *Histoire croisée* invites one to distinguish different and complementary dimensions of intercrossings that might be found in one and the same study at the empirical, epistemological and methodological level.⁷ The first of these dimensions anchors the intercrossing in the empirical soil and thus makes it the very object of the research. This allows new research questions to be formulated – questions that both comparative and transfer studies have difficulty grasping – such as how the local and global coproduce each other, or how in international architectural competitions new standards may arise from the encounter between the contest details, competitors' individual take on them, and the selection committee.

But intercrossings do not only relate to the interaction between objects, they also involve interactions

between the researcher and her object. This is the second dimension. At the epistemological level, *Histoire croisée* addresses both the researcher's perspective on the object and the issue of reflexivity. The epistemological dimension heeds that particularly sensitive point of the interaction between the characteristics of the object, the chosen approach and the researcher. This is a crucial point because whatever the intercrossings are, even in their empirical dimension, it is insufficient to merely note and record them, for they are not already given but require an observer to highlight them and construct their space of understanding.

As for the third dimension, the methodological one, studying intercrossings involves approaches such as multi-level analysis and the combination of different time-space scales. As a general rule, empirical objects are related to several scales simultaneously and are not amenable to a single lens. Thus from a spatial point of view, scales refer to the multiple scenes, arenas, settings and situations where the interactions that shape the object under study take place.⁸ From a temporal point of view, they refer back to the different temporalities involved in the process under study, which extend from the history of existing frameworks, institutions and representations to the temporalities of situated action.

From such a perspective the scales of time and space cannot be reduced to external explanatory factors; instead they become an intrinsic dimension of the object and an integral part of the analysis. In other words, scales are not only a cognitive and methodological option chosen by the researcher but inhere in the actors under study and thus become a true matter of inquiry.⁹ This means breaking with the logic of pre-existing, ready-made scales such as those often associated with national entities, cultural areas or major dates in political chronology. These scales are used as natural analytic frameworks defined independently of their object of inquiry.

Thus results a plea in favour of an empirical inquiry that can take into account the intercrossings and interactions between different scales. This means following the objects and protagonists involved in the process under study on the various scales where they evolve, perform or struggle, and more broadly inquiring into the scales themselves. In so doing, *Histoire croisée* argues in favour of going beyond dichotomist reasoning, that is, in terms of micro versus macro, and instead emphasising their inextricable interconnections and how they constitute each other, this being achieved by giving an interactive account of time and space that makes a fulcrum of people's agency.

Paying attention to agency does not mean shrinking the analysis back down to short-term and micro dimensions to the detriment of long-term and macro features; rather it calls for combining the long-term character of structures with the short-term character of what is happening in a given situation. The aim is to grasp the dynamic interplay between the structuring activity of people and the structuring power of existing frameworks that may constrain or sustain individual agency, and in turn be changed by people's activity.¹⁰ From such a perspective the activity of individuals appears both as structured and structuring, in a relationship of reciprocal interdependence between structures and action. Thus most of our institutions and action frameworks stem from a dual grounding, both within a long-term history of structures that has an impact on their logic and functioning, and in specific situations of action that play a decisive role in bringing them about or transforming them.

Histoire croisée seeks to understand how these two dimensions interact by developing in-depth empirical case studies. Beyond the singular logic of situations, it refers to the notion of configuration so as to emphasise the collective and temporal structuring of the processes under study.¹¹ Doing so, *Histoire croisée* seeks to open up promising

avenues for studying global topics by highlighting the interplay between transactions of different kinds that involve several scales at a time in a given contact zone. This may clearly apply to the architectural competitions investigated in this issue of *Footprint*.

The challenges of holding together the long-term structures and the short-term action

Holding together the long-term structures and short-term action is a foundational problem of the social sciences. It confronts the researcher with those basic dichotomies with which the social sciences struggle, structure versus action being just one of these, which works along with and often overlaps with others such as macro/micro, diachrony/synchrony, global/local, general/singular.

Max Weber made a significant contribution to this debate by laying the epistemological groundings of a sociology of action, while providing an overarching comparative analysis of worldwide historical processes of rationalisation.¹² However, a closer look reveals a partition between these two major components of his work. The empirical material used for his comparative historical sociology depicts representations, institutions, established practices and categories, but seldom seizes situations of action in progress. Weber's reasons for this are apparent from his research subjects and agenda.

In *History and Economy* he provides multiple examples from other times and societies to illustrate his thesis of a worldwide and multiform process of rationalisation, the aim being to demonstrate the superiority of Western rationalisation processes and thus modernity. The variation in spatial and historical scales in his work therefore serves a specific aim. The analysis proceeds not from a detailed description of the different cases in relation to each other or from an analysis of the contact zones, but from their organisation into a series whose components can

be contrasted, hierarchically arranged into examples and counter-examples, and synthesised in the form of ideal types.

The notion of ideal type developed by Weber at a methodological level and the notion of subjective meaning at an analytical level are his means of bridging agency and structure.¹³ These two levers certainly suit his empirical research agenda. However, as soon as a more complex use of spatial scales is undertaken, and the scales themselves become objects of inquiry, as *Histoire croisée* demands, then ideal types and subjective meaning prove insufficient, since they give no access to the fine mechanisms through which scales overlap and interact, take shape and may change. Consistent with Weber's concern for historicising contemporary issues, *Histoire croisée* departs from its approach in the way it combines historicity with situated-agency analysis. This short excursus into Weber's sociology teaches us that not every way of bridging agency and structure is relevant to every research goal. Because *Histoire croisée* is interested in the outcome of intercrossings, it requires appropriate ways of empirically integrating agency and structures. It is a matter of coherence between one's research questions and the methodological design of inquiry intended to handle them.

A brief recap of the dominant features of structure-focused and action-focused approaches, as derived from Weber's work, helps to better grasp the challenges of their integration. By columns, Table 1 characterises each approach in terms of lens, duration, frame of reference, object and method. The first two columns disjoin the time scales of the past from that of the present action. They also address specific objects of inquiry – concepts, representations, institutions, established practices and categories for structure-focused approaches versus agency and what people actually do in given situations for action-focused approaches. These differences go hand in hand with contrasted

	Structure-focused	Action-focused	Structure/action focused
Lens	Macro	Micro	Multi-scale
Duration	Long-term and middle-term	Short-term	Time spans specific to the research object
Frame of reference	Context	Situation	Configuration
Object	Concepts, representations, institutions, established practices and categories	Agency, what people actually do	Concepts, representations, institutions, established practices and categories, agency in action
Method	Exemplification, ideal type, illustrative cases, statistical series	Observing situated action and interactions	Following people, objects and their interactions on different time and space scales

Table 1: Three approaches and their key features

methods of inquiry – with a focus on exemplification, ideal type, illustrative cases and statistical series in the first case, and on the observation of situated action and interactions in the second. It is the aim of *Histoire croisée* (last column) to overcome the gaps and blind spots created when implementing these columns separately in the research design. It is not simply a matter of having their respective dimensions enter into dialogue with each other but to provide a means of access to the way these dimensions interact in the very constitution of empirical reality. Therein lies the processual contribution of *Histoire croisée* – making intercrossings, their unfolding in time and space, and their consequences an object of social-science research.

Conclusion

Histoire croisée means crossing borders of various kinds – territorial, linguistic, cultural...– and revisiting those analytic categories that bear the stamp of their spatial and temporal configurations. In doing so, *Histoire croisée* uses three main levers: empirical anchoring in concrete situations of action, multi-level and multi-sited analyses, and a self-reflexive take on the categories and the object at stake. By placing interrelationships, reciprocal influences, rejection or co-production phenomena at the heart of the analysis, it proposes a shift of perspective and another way of building the research object so as to create coherence between the research question, the object and the empirical method. This does not mean that comparative or transfer studies are in any way negated, but rather that *Histoire croisée* provides just another way of looking at and understanding the world.

Notes

1. For a general discussion of these different approaches, see Sebastian Conrad, *What is Global History?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016); and Alessandro Stanziani, *Eurocentrism and the Politics of Global History* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2018).
2. For an extended discussion of *Histoire croisée*, see Michael Werner and Bénédicte Zimmermann, 'Beyond Comparison: *Histoire Croisée* and the Challenge of Reflexivity', *History and Theory* 45, no. 1 (2006): 30–50.
3. Andreas Wimmer and Nina G. Schiller, 'Methodological Nationalism and Beyond: Nation-State Building, Migration and the Social Sciences', *Global Networks* 2, no. 4 (2002): 301–34.
4. Transfer studies were initiated by Michel Espagne and Michael Werner in a seminal text in 1987: 'La construction d'une référence culturelle allemande en France, genèse et histoire', *Annales ESC* 42, no. 4 (1987): 969–92.
5. It is only by extension that the term takes on the meaning 'to meet in passing, especially from opposite directions' (*Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary*, 1983), 309.
6. Given that transfer studies are concerned with transformations, they do in fact deal with certain aspects of change. But in limiting oneself to transfers, one cannot account for radical change and instances where new things, categories, practices or institutions arise for the first time. In other words, our understanding of transfers does not depend on understanding changes, so a more broadly encompassing approach is required.
7. On processual analysis, see Andrew Abbott, *Processual Sociology* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2016).
8. In *Raumsoziologie* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2001), her sociology of space, Martina Löw underscores this relational and labile dimension of spaces composed of objects and individuals that move beyond systems of geographical, institutional, political, economic and social coordinates which aim to stabilise spaces by establishing boundaries.
9. *Histoire croisée* departs on this point from a multi-focal perspective as depicted in Jacques Revel, ed., *Jeux d'échelles: La micro-analyse à l'expérience* (Paris: Éditions EHESS, 1996).
10. Karin Knorr-Cetina, 'The Micro-Sociological Challenge of Macro-Sociology: Toward a Reconstruction of Social Theory and Methodology', in *Advances in Social Theory and Methodology: Toward an Integration of*

Micro- and Macrosociologies, ed. Karin Knorr-Cetina and Aaron V. Cicourel, (London: Routledge, 1981).

- 11 The notion of configuration is drawn from Norbert Elias, *Was ist Soziologie?* (Weinheim: Juventa, 1971), 139–50, but whereas Elias developed a primarily hermeneutic approach to history – on the basis of readings of treatises on correct behavior, e.g. *Über den Prozess der Zivilisation*, *Histoire croisée* widens the scope to the study of ongoing action. This difference considerably modifies the research procedures involved in studying configurations.
12. Max Weber, *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft: Grundriss der verstehenden Soziologie* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2002 [1922]) and *Wirtschaftsgeschichte: Abriss der universalen Sozial- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1958).
13. Stephen Kalberg, *Max Weber's Comparative Historical Sociology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

Biography

Bénédicte Zimmermann is professor of sociology at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales in Paris and permanent fellow at the Wissenschaftskolleg (Institute for Advanced Study) in Berlin. Her main research interests are in the changing role of work in European societies and the challenges of multi-level and multi-sited analysis. Together with Michael Werner, she published 'Beyond Comparison: *Histoire Croisée* and the Challenge of Reflexivity', *History and Theory* 45, no. 1 (2006).

