



A Case for Comparative History

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The launch, at the time of a global pandemic that has dramatically altered the way academics teach and do research, of a new peer-reviewed, open-access history journal is twice welcome—for it manifests the continuing ability of the discipline of history to make sense of the time and world in which we live as well as its endurance in increasingly science-oriented academia. As an Editorial Board member of *Histories*, I am among those involved in shepherding this new journal along a successful path. In my capacity, I address potential contributors with a case for comparative history.

Unlike scholars in cognate disciplines such as literature and cultural anthropology, historians generally resist the comparative approach. The “spectre of (historical) comparison” was evoked by the late Benedict Anderson, a political scientist at Cornell University and the author of a study on the origins of nationalism that has the status of a classic in Anglophone historical studies.¹ Even within thematic subfields, be it political history or social history, historians focus predominantly on individual countries, and only rarely on a supranational region sharing common geographical, cultural, and historical characteristics (say, Eastern Europe or mainland Southeast Asia). This is partly due to the linguistic competence required to handle documentary sources, and also to research logistics involving access to archives and libraries—it is not accident that virtually every country’s national historiography is dominated by its own nationals, notable individual exceptions notwithstanding.

Although commonalities in geography, climate, and culture may dictate the limits of licit historical comparison in accordance to the dictum to not compare apples with oranges, both macro-historical phenomena and localized historical events may be illuminated by cross-national and cross-regional comparisons. Let me exemplify my point by drawing an example from the history of Thailand, my own research area. As the only country in Southeast Asia that escaped European domination (the British occupied Burma as an appendix of their Indian empire; the French Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos; and the Dutch the Indonesian archipelago), and embarked on administrative and infrastructural modernization in the late nineteenth century, the kingdom of Thailand (Siam until 1939) was long considered to bear no comparison to the other countries in the region. Even in a broader Asian perspective, the only analogy to Thailand was found in Japan, which underwent a highly successful state-driven modernization known as the Meiji Restoration (in both cases, a key role was played by Western advisors chosen according to their “national” specialties: British finance comptrollers, German engineers, Italian architects).

Back in 2004, I accepted a publisher’s offer to write a general history of Thailand on the understanding that my treatment of the subject would be thematic rather chronological.² That book was for me an opportunity to undo the predominant mode of historiographic employment, which, by ordering events chronologically from the most to the least remote, furnishes an explanatory device—the concatenation of events—whose working historians rarely make explicit. Themes, on the other hand, by virtue of their obvious arbitrariness, make self-evident their function as a

¹ (Anderson 1998), follow-up to his renown *Imagined Communities* (Anderson 1991).

² (Peleggi 2007).

historiographical device. As I conceptualized the book's structure, I started seeing parallels with the history of other countries, in particular Italy's—possibly because, being myself Italian, analogies struck me as more compelling. Similar to Italy, whose territorial unification, mythologized as the Risorgimento, was effected by Piedmont's House of Savoy through military annexations (but for Lombardy and Veneto, won in the wars against Austria), the modern kingdom of Siam came into being at the turn of the twentieth century though the assimilation of regional kingdoms and principalities in the northern and southern regions by the central kingdom based in Bangkok—a royal city which upgraded to national capital, like initially Turin (seat of the House of Savoy).

Thai historians bent on disputing the nationalist historical narrative have argued that the Bangkok monarchy carried out an internal colonization taking advantage of the imperialist pacification of Southeast Asia.³ I countered that, while there was some truth to the argument that governors dispatched from Bangkok to administer newly assimilated provinces were no less foreign to the local (ethnically composite) populace than were British and Dutch colonial commissioners to the Burmese and the Javanese people, respectively, the same could be said of a Piedmontese police superintendent sent to impose law and order in Calabria and Sicily. Indeed, both the officers sent from Bangkok and Turin met with popular resistance—in Thailand's northeast by a millenarian rebellion and in Italy's south by so-called brigands. Conversely, it was only in Siam (and Italy), and not in colonial states, that the ruling elite endeavored, after the national state came into being, to forge a national identity through the promotion of a standard language, the inculcation of common values and beliefs, the commemoration of historical figures and events. The intrinsic weakness of the Thai and Italian top-down nation-building projects was revealed few decades later by the rise to power of dictators who, after marginalizing the monarchies that had achieved territorial unification, enforced political and cultural uniformity (here the comparison is inescapable given the admiration expressed for Mussolini by his Thai counterpart, Phibun Songkhram, who in 1941 joined the Axis powers in World War II). Still more parallels can be found in the Cold War era, when the United States assigned to Thailand and Italy—foes turned subservient allies—a key strategic role in their respective regions, and conditioned heavily their domestic politics through economic and military aid. I never had the chance to further substantiate or qualify these suggestive analogies in the nation-building experiences of Thailand and Italy. However, I think they are convincing enough to support my case for comparative history that, challenging common sense, dares one to compare apples with oranges to see them both from a novel, possibly more revealing, angle.

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³ (Winichakul 1994).