

A Contingency-sensitive Theory of Global Change

Practices of Comparing as the Driving Force of Globalization/s

Angelika Eppe

Abstract *Subsequent to the demise of modernization theory, the assumption of a historical telos has become obsolete. The uncertainty, the contingency of future events, and the unintended side effects of human behavior seem to give evidence that history has no direction. This paper objects to the above view in three respects. Firstly, by arguing that practice theory can integrate the inconsistencies between the intentionality of human action and the contingency of historical events. Secondly, the paper shows that such an approach has the potential to lead to a new understanding of global change as a contradictory process. Given the contradictory nature of global change, the paper's conclusion reveals that certain practices prove to be particularly suited to intensify global change: the practices of comparison.*

The *Song of the Insufficiency of Human Struggling* opens the third act of Bertolt Brecht's *The Threepenny Opera*. When drafting the play, Brecht adapted a translation of John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera*, an 18th-century English ballad opera, prepared by his then partner Elisabeth Hauptmann. Complete with the music composed by Kurt Weill, *The Threepenny Opera* became the biggest success, as regards theatrical productions, during the Weimar Republic—the Nazis made sure to ban any public performances of the play as early as 1933. Nevertheless, Brecht's ballad opera gained significant international recognition, resulting in translations into numerous languages and worldwide productions rerunning the musical up to the present day.¹

The theatrical opera features a critique of the capitalist system from the point of view of a socialist. And the *Song of the Insufficiency* sarcastically questions the morality of all people. What's more, it ironizes the possibility of humans planning their future—its basic assumption expressing an attitude to life common to many people in the interwar period as well as today: in modern times, one can no longer derive

1 Bertolt Brecht/Ralph Manheim/John Willett, *The Threepenny Opera*, London 2015, liv, lxxxi–lxxvii.

the *horizon of expectation*, as Reinhart Koselleck put it, from the preceding *space of experiences*. Hence, the future is uncertain.² The song's irony aims at the ambivalence people have to deal with in uncertain times. On the one hand, plans, however good they may be, always seem to go astray—leading to the conclusion that human efforts to plan are never effective. At the same time, when people encounter uncertainty, the desire to control the future grows. Then again, how is this to succeed when empirical observation seems to suggest that actions in the present have no calculable influence on the future?

This view raises some questions, fundamental for the theory of history: is the future completely indeterminate—that is, causally unrelated to what people do? And does it follow that historical change is mere chance? There is another question behind this: if one denies the influence of actions in the present on the future, then one questions alike whether the effects of actions can be traced back to the intentions behind these actions, i.e., to the intentions of the person acting.

Since the triumph of the then-new social history in the 1960s, historians have ceased to assume that they can derive history from the actions of central actors or the great men of the time. Historical changes have been explained differently. In the tradition of Marxist conceptions of history, social history has held class antagonisms or social inequality to be the engine of historical change.³ Modernization theory instead introduced the concept of social differentiation and assumed that the path to modernity corresponded to certain regularities.⁴ This idea found an echo in Shmuel Eisenstadt's *multiple modernities*.⁵ In turn, the classical theory of modernization incurred censure by exponents of the dependency theory. They identified the global capitalist division of labor as the reason for the exclusion of the Global South from social development.⁶ With the emergence of global history, another line of argumentation came up, dispensing with individual actors as historically relevant variables and taking a fundamentally skeptical position about the explicability

2 Reinhart Koselleck, "'Space of Experience' and 'Horizon of Expectation': Two Historical Categories," in: Reinhart Koselleck (ed.), *Futures Past. On the Semantics of Historical Time*, trans. Columbia 2004, 255–276.

3 One of the best examples of the triumphant march of social history since the 1960s is the iconic work of Eric Hobsbawm, starting with *The Age of Revolution. Europe 1789–1848*, London 1962, followed by *Labouring Men. Studies in the History of Labour*, London 1964 and many other books such as *The Age of Empire*, London 1987 and *The Age of Extremes. The Short History of the Twentieth Century*, London 1994.

4 Cf. Talcott Parsons, *Action Theory and the Human Condition*, New York/London 1989; Seymour Martin Lipset, *American Exceptionalism. A Double-Edged Sword*, New York/London 1996.

5 Shmuel N. Eisenstadt, *Multiple Modernities*, in: *Daedalus*, 129 (1/2000), 1–29, URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20027613> [last accessed May 14, 2023].

6 Andre Gunder Frank (ed.), *The World System. Five hundred years or five thousand?*, London/New York 1994.

of historical processes; with this, it was not people's intentions or the historical *telos* that came to the fore as the actual trigger of historical change, but the contingency of historical events.⁷ By way of example, the discussion of why Europe and Asia took such different paths regarding their economic development since the late 18th century comes to mind. In Kenneth Pomeranz's view, it was neither dissimilar social structures nor certain activities of key players at that time that caused the disparity, but the fact that resources happened to be available in a particular place near early industrial centers. Admittedly, this—in my view untenable—position did not go unchallenged.⁸

Nevertheless, it is worth asking whether intentions and actions have to make way as driving forces of historical change. Is it contingency or unintended side-effects of human actions that actually drive historical evolution now?

In this essay, I counter this assumption in three ways: first, practice theory may encompass the intentionality of human action and the contingency of historical events. Second, such an encompassing approach may lead to a new understanding of global change as a contradictory process. While not without direction, the worldwide process is not geared to make progress towards a particular goal, such as a just, modern, or prosperous society. And third, due to the contradictory nature of global change, specific practices prove particularly suited to the intensification of global change: the practices of comparing.

Later on, I will explain these theses in more detail. However, in a first step, I will outline in this article why the theory of history should do without historical *telos*, why historical conceptions should understand the intentionality of human action as the starting point of historical change, and why such theoretical approaches should nevertheless take into account the contingency of historical events (1). Subsequently, I will substantiate why our understanding of global change should rate the worldwide trends as a directed singular process without neglecting the manifold manifestations and underlying, sometimes even counteracting, sub-processes. Instead of speaking of *global change*—the term emphasizing the singular—I prefer to use the term *globalization/s*. Moreover, I will clarify in this article the interplay between the singularity of the specifically directed development and the plurality on the phenomenological level (2). The force that drives globalization/s is an inherent dialectic of increasing convergence with simultaneously intensifying divergence. This article's line of argument identifies comparative practices as a central stimulus for this dialectic (3). Why comparative practices? The reason, so my argument goes, lies

7 Kenneth Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence. China, Europe, and the Making of the Modern World Economy*, Princeton 2021.

8 Cf. for instance, Peer Vries, *State, Economy and the Great Divergence. Great Britain and China, 1680s–1850s*, London 2015; Kaveh Yazdani, *India, Modernity and the Great Divergence. Mysore ad Gujarat (17th to 19th century)*, Leiden 2017.

in a structural analogy between globalization dynamics and comparative practices. Comparing, organized as a triadic process negotiating similarity (convergence) and difference (divergence), fosters the dialectics of globalization.

The Theory of History Without *Telos*, Yet Not Without a Direction

With the European Enlightenment of the 18th century and the emergence of historical science as an independent discipline in the 19th century in Germany and other European countries, religiously based teleology lost importance when it came to discussing the course of time.⁹ The notion that history has a goal has been controversial ever since; nevertheless, it continues to shape numerous conceptions of history to this day. By way of example, I will address—with the utmost brevity—the Marxist position, which holds to a secular *telos* of history and may represent such a conception paradigmatically.

The *Telos* of History, or the Necessity of a Natural Law

Karl Marx's conception of the theory of history finds an echo in Berthold Brecht's stanzas, referred to at the beginning of this article, insofar as they suggest that the deliberate striving for a better future is meaningless. "It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness."¹⁰ The historical materialism of Marx and Engels combined Hegel's notion of a dialectical dynamic in history with Feuerbach's view that economic conditions shaped human consciousness. The driving force of historical change was thus identified: in historical materialism, history is made in the course of the negation of production conditions and class struggle. A Marxist-based theory of historical change is, therefore, initially simple. There is a subject (the class), a spelled-out dynamic (the dialectics), and a *telos* of history (the society without social inequality). The interpretation earns historical plausibility when recurring to the historical development of human society featuring the steps from slavery to the

9 In his seminal contribution "multiple modernities," Shmuel Eisenstadt argues, on the one hand, against simple theories of secularization. On the other hand, he underlines the importance of religion for the specific dynamics of European-American modernity. Cf. Eisenstadt, *Multiple Modernities*, 1, 20–22, 22.

10 Karl Marx, Preface, in: Karl Marx (ed.), *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, Moscow 1970, 19–27.

oppression of the working class to socialism. Marxism sees history as a history of progress.¹¹

The Marxist conception of history goes well with the assumption that human striving is futile (or the *Song of the Insufficiency of Human Struggling*). In contrast to other progress-oriented theories of history, conceptualized by liberal or enlightenment thinkers since the 18th century, and due to historical materialism, the intentionality of human action does not play a role in the Marxist theory of history. At a second glance, it is this aspect that complicates things when it comes to the Marxist theory of history. The rejection of the plannability of the future stands out as fundamental in the *Threepenny Opera*: “Aye, make yourself a plan. They need you at the top! Then make yourself a second plan. Then let the whole thing drop.”¹² Why, then, is there still progress in history?

Class struggle, as the driving force of progress, is neither an individualized phenomenon nor tied to the individual's intentions. Rather, the respective specific mode of production generates its own negation and thus drives history forward. At one point, Marx speaks of the “necessity of a natural process.”¹³ Admittedly, other passages in Marx's works acknowledge the importance of the intentionality of the individual. For example, in the *Theses on Feuerbach*, he notes that it is important to go one step further than interpreting the world, as philosophers had done, and to change it.¹⁴ After all, without the intentionality of human action and the notion of being able to influence the future, such a thesis would be meaningless. However, it is predominantly true that Marxism or historical materialism allows the individual action of human actors to recede into the background. At the same time, Marxism maintains that history is a teleological process—merely and simply despite any intentions and in the form of natural law.

Marxist theory of history significantly impacted major social-historical conceptions of history in the 20th century.¹⁵ However, theories of history with a completely different focus also adhered to the idea of history as a teleological process. In the field of historiography, in addition to the social history deeply rooted in the Marxist tradition, the sociologically based theory of modernization became a concept often

11 For a more profound insight into the significance of the historical dimension in Karl Marx's work, cf. Enzo Traverso, *Marxism*, in Chiel van den Akker (ed.), *The Routledge Companion to Theory of History*, London/New York 2022, 34–49.

12 Brecht/Manheim/Willett, *The Threepenny Opera*, 62.

13 Bernhard Schütz, *Fortschritt und Arbeitszeit. Ein Vergleich der Ansichten von Marx, Keynes und der Sozialdemokratie*, in: *momentum quarterly* 3 (4/2014), 259–269, 262.

14 Karl Marx/Friedrich Engels, *Collected Works*, London 2010, 5: “Philosophers have hitherto only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it.”

15 Eric Hobsbawm's books were so influential in academia that his death marked an epochal turning point in historiography. Cf. J.H. Arnold/M. Hilton/J. Rüger (eds.), *History after Hobsbawm. Writing the Past for the Twenty-First Century*, Oxford 2018.

implicit in interpretations of historical developments. The dependency theory, advocated by Latin American and European sociologists and economists, combined Marxist beliefs with a reversal of some of the arguments of modernization theory, and remained wedded to teleological historiography—through its negation.¹⁶

Beyond the Telos: Contingency as a Stimulus in Global Change

Since the 1970s, both the Marxist and the modernization-theoretical or other progress-focused conceptions of history have increasingly been countered by the argument that history is precisely not a teleological process. Such argumentation finds support in the proverbial everyday experience that things never turn out the way one expects. When perceptions of processes address technical or moral progress, secularization, or the increase in freedom or prosperity, all of these notions, so the objections go, are premised on ideology and fail to derive their insights empirically from history, or are *ex post facto* interpretations without any predictive value. As a result, in the last 20 years, *contingency* has become a key concept for those who see history as a non-directed process.¹⁷ Globalization histories predominantly oriented toward economic path dependencies gave way to more skeptical globalization histories.¹⁸

The different ways of arguing became particularly well known in the *Great Divergence* debate triggered by Kenneth Pomeranz about 20 years ago. The term *Great Divergence*, coined by Samuel Huntington, refers to the divergence of the economic development in Asia and Europe that began to emerge in 1800. Pomeranz believed he could prove the cause was a coincidence: coal resources in an infrastructurally suitable location in England versus coal resources in an infrastructurally poor area in the Yangtze River Delta in China. Still, global historians such as Ian Morris seized on the argument that the coincidence of geographical location was the historically significant factor;¹⁹ a thesis that—not least given the current development of the global economy—certainly has to be considered outdated today.²⁰

16 Patrick Manning/Barry K. Gills (eds.), *Andre Gunder Frank and global development: visions, remembrances, and explorations*, London 2013.

17 Cf., for instance, Alon Confino, *Contingency, the Essence of History*, in Alon Confino (ed.), *Foundational Pasts. The Holocaust as Historical Understanding*, Cambridge 2011, 97–117.

18 Jan De Vries, *Reflections on Doing Global History*, in Maxine Berg (ed.), *Writing the History of the Global. Challenges for the 21st Century*, Oxford 2013, 32–48; Kenneth Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence. China, Europe, and the Making of the Modern World Economy*, Princeton 2000; Kenneth Pomeranz, *Ten Years after. Responses and Reconsiderations*, in: *Historically Speaking* 12 (4/2011), 20–25.

19 Ian Morris, *War! What Is It Good For? Conflict and the Progress of Civilization from Primates to Robots*, London 2014.

20 Jack A. Goldstone, *Why understanding the timing of divergence matters*, in: *Journal of Global History* 16 (2/2021), 309–314; Victor Court, *A Reassessment of the Great Divergence*

Nevertheless, that point of view concerning the driving force of historical change is interesting. According to the argumentation, historical change would, at best, be an unintended consequence of human action. In terms of historical theory, a trenchant formulation of the insight would read as follows: deliberate, i.e., intentional human actions do not provide the groundwork for historical change; history has no *telos*; the future is always uncertain. I would like to allege that immoderately attaching importance to contingency and abandoning intentionality as a trigger of historical change leads to a diminution of causality in the theory of history.²¹

The problematic Diminution of Causality in the Theory of History, and the Significance of Intentionality

The negation of purposiveness in history, the emphasis on the contingency of historical change, and the abandonment of intentionality as the mainspring of history—these notions hit upon something. Still, in doing so, they conceal something else. Yes, there is no way to explain historical change exclusively in terms of intentional human actions; yes, intentions have unintended consequences that can be very effective historically; yes, history has no *telos* providing the leverage point for dealing exhaustively with the subject of historical change. The future is uncertain and prognostic reliability is poor. Nonetheless, even if there is no *telos* in history, it does not necessarily follow that change results from contingent and non-intended events alone. Indeed, there is another objection: given that history has no *telos*, that does not mean global change has no direction. Here the particular significance of the term globalization/s comes into play, since it points to unity in diversity. I will come back to this shortly.

At this point, I would like to emphasize first that we should hold on to the idea that history has a direction. Only by doing so are we able to assess processes meaningfully. If history has no direction, we could indeed show which factors were necessary preconditions for a particular development—for example, the coal deposits in England for the increasing use of steam engines. However, we cannot explain why that specific factor initiated the process of industrialization. Suppose we want to

Debate: towards a Reconciliation of apparently Distinct Determinants, in: *European Review of Economic History* 24 (4/2020), 633–674; Roman Studer, *The Great Divergence Reconsidered. Europe, India, and the Rise to Global Economic Power*, Cambridge 2015.

21 Kim Sterelny gives a different answer to why the relevance of causality as a constitutive factor for explaining historical developments dwindles in historiography. He argues against a comprehensive claim that history is nothing but contingency. To that end, he suggests it may be productive to distinguish between robust and fragile historical trajectories. Kim Sterelny, Contingency and History, in: *Philosophy of Science* 83 (4/2016), 521–539.

interpret and explain developments as historical processes. In that case, it is imperative to understand why events or actions provoked (intentionally) by people have been oriented in a specific direction and thus initiated or advanced a process. One of the major challenges in historiography is to discern past actions and find a cogent description of their relations. Johann Gustav Droysen, one of the founders of historiography—once a German branch of science, today a worldwide and renowned discipline in academia—noted:

“[...] An interaction that is considered a business today qualifies as a part of history after one generation if it was important enough. How does a business become history? Where do we get the measure for ranking business dealings as history?”²²

These “business dealings,”—that is, the actions of the contemporaries—are the basis of history. According to Droysen, the task of the historian is to find the “measure” to recognize them as affecting history.

History is therefore tied to the concept of action and, with the concept of action, to the intentionality of human actors—also evident in the overuse of the term *unintended side effects* or, as Wolfgang Reinhardt puts it, the unintended consequences. The term alone suggests that these effects derive from a main effect, i.e., they are not autonomously conceivable. Intentionality was, is, and will be the cause of action, regardless of any effects. In contrast, those who, like Kenneth Pomeranz, rely on contingency as the primary driver of change do not cut the surface with their explanation of historical change. The availability of coal is indeed fundamental for the beginning of industrialization, but the link to historical change is loose. There were undoubtedly coal deposits in other regions of the world. Still, no process like industrialization were triggered there. After all, people in England coming up with the idea of using coal to fire their steam engines turned the means into a lucrative business. The decisive point here is that the actions of the inventors, technicians, workers, and merchants involved were not aimed at initiating any such thing as industrialization. Instead, the beginning of this development, as well as the process itself, has been identified by historians in retrospect. Many coincidences were necessary to make that process possible. Thus, adhering to the notion of intentionality is not tantamount to objecting to the importance of contingency when it comes to historical change. Rather, acknowledging the significance of intentions opens up the possibility of recognizing the interplay of different factors more accurately.²³ Any

22 Johann Gustav Droysen, *Grundriss der Historik*, Leipzig 1868, 4, [https://www.deutschestextarchiv.de/book/show/droysen_historik_1868, last accessed March 25, 2023].

23 Victor Court argues with respect to the “Great” or the “Little Divergence” that three components influenced each other: “biogeography, culture-institutions, and contingency-conjuncture.” Cf. Victor Court, *A Reassessment of the Great Divergence Debate*, 633–674.

authors writing global history will have to find answers to how a discipline bent on emphasizing contingency and the complex character of events nevertheless arrives at macro-level analyses and interpretations when conceptualizing their historical narrative.²⁴ Thus, I would like to emphasize that if we deem actions one of the key elements of our considerations when mapping out the theory of history, that does not imply that we have to deny the significance of contingent constellations or unintended consequences. The respective approach merely sees the driving force for change not so much in contingencies but in intentions.

While indicating that historical causality is solely based on human intentionality, we must avoid adopting a deterministic perspective. One cannot safely assume what effects a human action will have; hence, the context of action will hardly ever be the same. Influences are infinitely diverse. Therefore, the course of events is always contingent; it is imperative to take unintended side effects of human action into account. And yet, we should hold to the causal connection between intentional action and historical change. How do we accomplish that?

How can we make both intentional human action and the accompanying unintentional side effects productive for a theory of historical change, and precisely not play them off against each other?

All things considered, what we need is to formulate a contingency-sensitive theory of global historical change.²⁵ On the one hand, such a theory should do justice to the imponderability of developments, and, on the other hand, it should have more to offer than a description of past events and coincidental constellations. To this end, we must answer some key questions. How can we use intentional human actions and unintended consequences productively to explain historical change without pitting them against each other? Can we combine the notion of the contingency and uncertainty of future events, the assumption of the inadequacy of human efforts, and the idea of history as a directed but unpredictable process? Is it possible to understand history as a process comprising phases or even epochs²⁶ while acknowledging the inherent anarchy, inadequacy, and heterogeneity in human actions? The goal should

24 Georg Ferguson-Cradler, Fisheries' collapse and the making of a global event, 1950s–1970s, in: *Journal of Global History*, 13 (3/2018), 399–424, esp. 423.

25 Wolfgang Knöbl, *Die Kontingenz der Moderne. Wege in Europa, Asien und Amerika*, Frankfurt am Main/New York 2007.

26 This is a classical discussion among historians. It has gained momentum, however, when it comes to global history. Cf., for instance, Frederick Cooper, Modernity, in Frederick Cooper (ed.), *Colonialism in Question. Theory, Knowledge, History*, Berkeley 2005, 113–149; Helge Jordheim, Against Periodization. Koselleck's Theory of Multiple Temporalities, in: *History and Theory* 51 (2/2012), 151–171; Thomas Maissen, Defining epochs in global history—Can we write a History-in-common without shared concepts?, in: Thomas Maissen/Barbara Mittler (eds.), *Why China did not have a Renaissance—and why that matters. An interdisciplinary Dialogue*, Berlin/Boston 2018, 25–34.

be to reconcile the uncertainty of any future with a theory of history oriented toward causes of global historical change. What does all that mean for the connection between intentionality and historical change?

Practices Mediate between Human Intentionality and the Contingency of Change

Since individual actions are inconceivable without intentionality and intentions do not determine the effects of actions, a theory of history must avoid formulating a direct, derivative relation between historical change and the intentionality of individual actions. Instead, such a theory must mediate individual actions, the contingency of effects, and overarching change. It is precisely at this point that the Bielefeld comparative research comes in.²⁷

The starting assumption of the Bielefeld comparative research is that applying practice theory allows for mediation between (global) historical change and the actions of actors, between the contingency of circumstances and the unintended consequences. Practices are socially shared, and shape individual actions without determining them. Additionally, practices are always dynamic since each particular action can change the practice to some degree. In critical engagement with the practice-theoretical considerations of Theodore Schatzki, Andreas Reckwitz, and Pierre Bourdieu,²⁸ the Bielefeld comparative research assumes that different practices can overlap, influence each other, change, and solidify into practice formations.²⁹ The solidification of practice formations facilitates diffusion; that is, the disentangling of some practice from a specific (historical or local) context and its embedding in a new one.³⁰ For example, around the year 1800, world travelers discussed climatic

27 Angelika Eppe/Walter Erhart, Practices of Comparing. A New Research Agenda Between Typological and Historical Approaches, in: Angelika Eppe/Walter Erhart/Johannes Grave (eds.), *Practices of Comparing. Towards a New Understanding of a Fundamental Human Practice*, Bielefeld 2020, 11–38.

28 Theodore R. Schatzki, *Social Practices. A Wittgensteinian Approach to Human Activity and the Social*, Cambridge 1996; Andreas Reckwitz, Grundlelemente einer Theorie sozialer Praktiken. Eine sozialtheoretische Perspektive, in: *Zeitschrift für Soziologie* 32 (4/2003), 282–301; Theodore R. Schatzki/Karin Knorr-Cetina/Eike Savigny (eds.), *The Practice Turn in Contemporary Theory*, London 2001; Johannes Grave, Vergleichen als Praxis. Vorüberlegungen zu einer praxistheoretisch orientierten Untersuchung von Vergleichen, in: Angelika Eppe/Walter Erhart (eds.), *Die Welt beobachten. Praktiken des Vergleichens*, Frankfurt am Main 2015, 135–159.

29 Angelika Eppe/Antje Flüchter/Thomas Müller, *Praktiken des Vergleichens: Modi und Formationen. Ein Bericht von unterwegs, Work-ing Paper des SFB 1288 No. 6*, Bielefeld 2020, [https://pub.uni-bielefeld.de/download/2943010/2943628/WorkingPaper6_SFB1288.pdf].

30 Anthony Giddens, *The Constitution of Society. Outline of the Theory of Structuration*, Cambridge 1984; Anthony Giddens, *Capitalism and Modern Social Theory. An Analysis of the writ-*

conditions in the Americas in an early-modern manner in relation to the character traits of the inhabitants and thought of them by comparing them with Europe. This way of comparing, which solidified into a practice formation that inseparably intertwines climate and character traits, still characterized comparative practices at the end of the 19th century, when supposed racial differences were scientifically researched.

It is not only solidified practice formations that facilitate the spread of practices to other (world) regions. So-called “communities of practice”³¹ do the same. According to our definition, “*communities of practice*” comprise actors who share practices and reinforce the practices’ reach, influence, or structure-forming power. The actors do not have to meet in person or be aware that they share practices to be part of a community. *Communities of practice* do not necessarily have knowledge of themselves.³² Rather, practices shared by many actors exist because of the tacit understanding that something is done in a certain way.³³ Doing things this way, therefore, often feels “natural” to actors and is not experienced as the result of social practices. The concepts *communities of practice* and *practice formation* are key for understanding the transition from an individual setting to practices shared by a specific community to universalized comparing practices.

To take up this example again, discourses on race could spread so well because the international scientific community supported the approach, and because they

ings of Marx, Durkheim and Max Weber, Cambridge 1971; Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity*, Cambridge 1990.

- 31 Etienne Wenger, *Communities of Practice. Learning, Meaning and Identity*, Cambridge 1998.
- 32 Karl Marx distinguishes between a “class in itself” and a “class for itself.” People of the latter category share more than the same living and labor conditions; they recognize their shared interests as a class and become class-conscious. One can easily apply this distinction to communities of practice. The communities do not have to be aware of the fact that they use the same practices. However, such “tacit knowledge” can become explicit. In that case, a community would become a “community of practice for itself.” Think, for instance, of organizations like the Times Higher Education (THE) that run world university rankings. Cf. Jelena Brankovic, Leopold Ringel, Tobias Werron, How Rankings Produce Competition: The Case of Global University Rankings, in: *Zeitschrift für Soziologie* 47 (4/2008), 270–288.
- 33 In some cases, sources give deep insights into how practices came into existence. See, for instance, Johannes Nagel, Johannes/Tobias Werron, The Civilizing Force of National Competition. U.S. Nationalist Reasoning in the Mid-to-Late Nineteenth Century, in: Daniela Ruß/James Stafford (eds.), *Competition in World Politics: Knowledge, Strategies and Institutions*, 2021, 107–131. In most cases, sources do not allow for such insights because actors adapt and transform comparing practices without expressively saying so. The politics or ethics of comparison go unrecognized. Cf. Zhang Longxi, Crossroads, Distant Killing, and Translation: On the Ethics and Politics of Comparison, in: Rita Felski/Stanford Friedman (eds.), *Comparison: Theories, Approaches, Uses*, Baltimore 2013, 46–63.

could overlap with existing practices of differentiating groups of people in local contexts.³⁴ Social or religious differences were reinterpreted and extended by a practice of comparing oriented at race as a key reference point. These reinterpretations reverberated back into the international community of race experts. A good example of such reciprocal effects is Fernando Ortíz's 1906 study of Afro-Cuban religion.³⁵ Influenced by the racial discourses of his time (globally established comparative practices), such as those prominently advocated by the Italian scholar Cesare Lombroso, Ortíz combined Social Darwinist arguments with anthropological observations in early 20th-century Cuba (reference to the local context). While Lombroso's theories experienced a revival in Nazi ideology (local development into a racist ideology), in subsequent years, Ortíz left the Social Darwinist components behind and developed a particularly culturalist conception of social differences (local reinterpretation).

In the late 1930s, Ortíz coined the term "transculturación."³⁶ The concept is based on the notion of the equivalence of culturally different characteristics. Indeed, it is still an important reference point in cultural studies today (reverberating with a global discourse).³⁷ This concept completely overcomes any argumentation based on biology or social Darwinism. They make way for the neutral, non-judgmental concept of cultural difference. Eventually, the concept expanded the thought space even in the global scientific discourse and thus changed academic thinking sustainably. In this example, the direct connection becomes evident between the change in the global discourse (changed understanding of cultural differences) and the intentionality of an individual (Ortíz's intention to argue against racism). What additional discursive or social effects, what further experiences, discussions, encounters, and constellations played into this change? And what counter-discourses came across? All of this and much more is undetermined and, to a large extent, shaped by coincidences.

34 Julian Gärtner/Malin S. Wilckens (eds.), *Racializing Humankind: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Practices of 'Race' and Racism*, Cologne 2022.

35 Fernando Ortíz, *Hampa afro-cubana. Los negros brujos (apuntes para un estudio de etnología criminal). Con una carta prólogo del Dr. C. Lombroso. Con 48 figuras dibujos por Gustavino*, Madrid 1906.

36 Fernando Ortíz, Los factores humanos de la cubanidad, in: *Revista Bimestre Cubana* 14 (2/1940), 161–86; Fernando Ortíz, *El contrapunteo cubano del tabaco y del azúcar (advertencia de sus contrastes agrarios, económicos, históricos y sociales, su etnografía y su transculturación)*, La Habana 1940.

37 Consuelo Naranjo Orovio, Consuelo, A Network of Networks. Fernando Ortíz, Crossroad between Cultures, in: Fernando Ortíz, *HAU Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 11 (1/2021), 52–66; Mark Stein, The Location of Transculture, in: Frank Schulze-Engler, Sissy Helff (eds.), *Transcultural English Studies. Theories, Fictions, Realities*, Leiden/Boston 2008, 249–266; Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes. Travel and Transculturation*, London/New York 1992.

The interaction of contingency and intentionality is not only apparent when it comes to racial discourses. Consider professional war observers in the 19th century, world travelers, or medical experts: all their observations or insights and the knowledge they generated came into being because they wanted to classify supposedly new worlds.³⁸ In all these examples, it becomes clear that practices of comparing were a particularly suitable means to fulfill this intention. With the help of comparisons, observers intentionally related world regions and actors, some of which had no previous contact at all. The fact that they changed perceptions and communications of the world society at once may have far exceeded their intentions.

A practice-theoretical approach makes it possible to describe this interplay of intention and contingency and to find the underlying causes that have set free the dynamics while avoiding getting caught in the pitfalls of teleological historiography. In a theory of history grounded in practice theory, contingency comes into play at several points: first, at the level of individual action, which is always already integrated into social practices, but not determined by them. Rarely can one establish with certainty the causes when a person behaves differently than has been customary in the past. Second, at the transition from particular practices to a comprehensive practice formation. In a practice formation, different practices are interwoven and transformed into a comparatively stable order. For example, one can hardly date with precision when the connection between race, climate, and religion, which characterized the early studies of Fernando Ortíz, became detached. Third, contingency finally comes into play when different practices or practice formations overlap. Some practices are not adopted by certain actors; some get changed, merge into other practices, or overlap with already established ones to form new ones. The diverse Cuban society that distinguished between many hues of skin colors in different mixtures in the 19th century developed the utopian idea that racial differences should not matter. This view, forcefully articulated by national hero José Martí in *Nuestra América* in 1891, could not prevent Cuban society from evolving into a dichotomously ordered society of supposedly Black and White inhabitants. Comparative practices, as they had been imported from U.S. society during the Spanish-American War of 1898, prevailed within only one decade. At last, this historical development provoked Fernando Ortíz to begin his anthropological studies. At any point in time, things could have turned out differently. Impressed by the non-white Cuban generals, the U.S. soldiers could have brought a different comparative practice back to their homeland. Understanding exactly why Black-and-White comparisons became hegemonic instead, how and why they gradually took hold in the Afro-Cuban

38 Johannes Nagel, Globalization, Progress, and Race in Military Reformers. World Observations after 1865, in: *American Studies* 66 (4/2021), 651–677; Niko Rohé, European medical experts in wars of 'others': the Greco-Turkish War of 1897, in: *European Review of History/Revue européenne d'histoire* 26 (2/2019), 163–177.

communities of practice as well, and how other ideas nonetheless lived on and continually subversively challenged this dichotomy, is something that needs to be explored in greater detail in the future.³⁹

I want to emphasize that practice theory effectively mediates between intentionality as the mainspring of directed action, the contingency of circumstances, and the unintended consequences at both micro and meso levels (*individual action/practice formation and communities of practice*). By and large, this is a decisive step towards a contingency-sensitive theory of global historical change. The next step is to address how a theory may formulate an understanding of global change in its unity and multiplicity—and as a directed process, but not oriented towards a concrete goal.

Unity and Diversity in global change: Globalization/s

Global change is a term that leaves open whether it refers to isolated processes tied together on the grounds of their worldwide effects or whether it denotes a historical process, i.e., an observable development over a longer time. Conversely, *globalization* is clearly a term that claims there is global change over a longer period that certain properties can characterize. However, the term is often problematized in regard to inheriting the legacy of modernization theory or carrying a teleological burden. In fact, the term *globalization* partakes of a problem it shares with any process term: it claims that there are changes that can be grouped under the umbrella of a specific process term based on the similarity of their characteristics. The same is true of terms like *enlightenment*, *industrialization*, and *secularization*. Eventually, *globalization* as a process term sets a new benchmark insofar as the term's core meaning points to the assumption that geographical expansion is increasing and that the process encompasses the whole world from a certain point on. At first glance, this description is indeed reminiscent of the concept of modernization—which, for one thing, asserts the spread of modernity and, for another, presents the term *modernity* as morally charged with values such as freedom and human dignity. Although the term *globalization* seems to abstain from any moral claims, it implies that the world is becoming more and more similar. Globalization invokes the connotation of increasing compression of time and space and appears as a process of convergence.

39 Cf. Angela Gutierrez, *The Difference between Protest and War is the Person Comparing: Racism in the Early Republic in Cuba*, forthcoming 2023.

Critical voices frequently tried to problematize this view, with good reasons.⁴⁰ Criticism of the concept is as old as the concept itself. Interestingly, the emergence of criticism did not prevent the concept from spreading, either in academia or among the general public. As unsatisfactory as the concept of globalization may be—fathomed as an increasing compression of time and space or as a process of convergence—it refers to an everyday experience. The perception of the world's interdependence, which is undeniably a characteristic of our world today, is supported by the daily experience that actions in one place actually have, or at least could have, effects on other corners of the world. Admittedly, the same holds true even for such distant times as the 16th century: for example, when Inca Garcilaso, a native of South America, exchanged ideas with European Jesuits about whether comparisons between worlds were to be considered as somewhat helpful or rather as disastrous.⁴¹ However, the scope is different today. It is misleading if today, against the backdrop of the return of geopolitics, amongst other things evident in the Ukraine war, some voices spread the assertion that globalization has ended.⁴² We know that crop failure in Ukraine is one of the causes of famine in Africa. Globalization has not come to its end, nor will it terminate at any point soon in the foreseeable future.

Still, convergence is an essential facet of globalization, but by no means the only one. After all, the differences between and even within societies, cultures, world regions, and economies stand out and seem more fundamental than we thought for a long time. Globalization is, therefore, a contradictory process combining convergence and divergence. While all parts of the world have apparently moved closer together, and connectivity is increasing, at the same time one finds worldwide profound asymmetries accompanied by processes of exclusion and disconnection. The

40 Cynthia Ghorra-Gobin, *Mondialisation Et Globalisation*, in: *Géococonfluences*, (2017), [<http://geoconfluences.ens-lyon.fr/informations-scientifiques/a-la-une/notion-a-la-une/mondialisation-globalisation>], last accessed May 29, 2023]; Frederick Cooper, *Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, History*, Berkeley 2005; Arjun Appadurai, *Public worlds 1. Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, Minneapolis 1996; Jerry H. Bentley, *Theories of World History Since the Enlightenment*, in: Jerry H. Bentley (ed.), *Oxford Handbook of World History*, Oxford 2012.

41 Inca Garcilaso de la Vega, *Primera Parte de los Comentarios Reales*, Lisbon 1609. The author's name is the pseudonym of Gómez Suárez de Figueroa, the son of a female descendant of a Peruvian aristocratic family and a Spanish colonial officer. Even though the Incans featured patrilineal inheritance, he chose to link his authorship to the Peruvian aristocracy. Hans-Jürgen Lüsebrink, *De l'usage de la comparaison dans les écrits des Jésuites sur les Amériques*, in M. A. Bernier/C. Donato/H.-J. Lüsebrink (eds.), *Jesuit Accounts of the Colonial Americas: Inter-cultural Transfers, Intellectual Disputes, and Textualities*, Toronto 2014, 418–436.

42 Cf., for instance, the article *At Davos, the end of globalization is on everyone's mind*. The US-China trade war and the race for subsidies are fueling global fragmentation, the central theme of the 53rd World Economic Forum in Switzerland, in: *Le Monde*, January 21, 2023.

perspective from which someone looks at globalization seems to be the cause when contemporaries experience simultaneous but contradictory processes: connectedness and disconnectedness mean different things to a young person in Bielefeld, a white female diplomat at the UN in New York, or a male student in Grozny. Beyond each individual's horizon of experience, globalization is best described as a dialectical movement of increasing convergence and evolving divergence, advancing unification and spreading fragmentation, growing global commonalities, and deepening local differences.

What follows for an approach grounded in a theory of history? How is it that unification and fragmentation coincide? What preconditions do we need when we aim to bring together various individual perspectives and the comprehensive worldviews of communities? Globalization is not abstract; human actors and non-human environments drive it. When debaters pondering on the *Great Divergence* claimed—in short—that it is the resources that lead to the fundamental differences between Asian and European development, I would disagree: when it comes to economic globalization, it is always people who trade, sell, and exchange, and thus set globalizing processes in motion. Just as objects do not constitute comparison, resources are not the primary cause of globalization. Admittedly, objects play a central role in comparisons, and resources significantly affect globalization. However, comparisons and globalization have another aspect in common: both are the persistently contradictory outcome of social practices applied by sundry actors in concrete local contexts. Suppose we understand globalization as an outcome of different social practices. In that case, globalization becomes ambiguous and contingent, a process that points in different directions and calls for a descriptive term in the plural. When it comes to emphasizing that historical change has a direction, although currently spanning the simultaneous increase of convergence and divergence, a theory of historical change should, reasonably, use the term globalization/s.

The admission that we find a worldwide process of increasing interdependence at the heart of globalization/s does not imply a teleological perspective, nor a disregard for the diversity of local experiences, nor the neglect of missing links in global networks, nor the omission of counter-movements. Disconnectedness and resistance are integral components of a global history of globalization/s.

To sum up: Globalization/s are the result of social practices. They produce convergence and divergence in equal measure. Globalization/s reveal a dialectical process with three poles: two entities converge (for example, the racial conceptions of the U.S. and Cuban societies in the aftermath of the 1898 war) and by doing so bring forth divergence from the previous state or other entities, resulting in the third pole. At the same time, they create a new incentive for convergence (communities of practice join the dichotomous notion) and divergence (subversive comparative practices try to overcome it).

The Structural Analogy between Comparative Practices and Globalization Dynamics

Markedly, when understanding globalization/s as a dialectic process serves as the springboard of our considerations, a structural analogy to comparative practices catches the eye: comparative practices negotiate similarities and differences regarding a *tertium comparationis*. Comparative practices are thus based on a triadic movement.⁴³ And the process of globalization/s gains momentum when the interplay of convergence and distinction comes about, continually generating more and more nuances of both, along with fresh grounds for convergence and new lines of distinction. Therefore, comparative practices are predestined to fuel the dialectics of globalization/s. Both globalization/s and comparative practices are based on dynamic structures featuring three poles. While globalizing dialectics produces convergence and divergence, comparative practices solidify and dynamize similarity and difference.

How exactly does the triadic structure of comparisons translate into a dialectical process with globalizing power? As explained above, some interventions misleadingly assume that the term *globalization/s* connotes the increasing convergence of the world. In contrast, comparing as a practice is said to emphasize divergence; or, more precisely: comparing does exclusively emphasize the identification of differences—a fundamental misunderstanding insofar as actors, when poised to compare, assume categorical similarity concerning the entities they want to compare.⁴⁴ The assumption of similarities in the entities to be compared is the very starting point of every act of comparing. In the next step, actors relate differences and similarities to a *tertium comparationis*. Differences thus do not appear until the second step. And even in that step, they are not to be confused with the epistemic goal. Eventually, the act of comparing is a matter of relating resemblances to differences based on the assumption of existing similarities. However, we find that the underlying categorical assumption of similarities is usually ignored and, as a kind of implicit knowledge, tacitly assumed. Yet therein precisely lies an influential force deployed by actors undertaking comparisons. It is the actors who make entities comparable in the first place. In order for them to make entities comparable, they must—it bears repeating—presuppose similarities. Comparing is an activity an actor puts into practice within a specific historical context. For a start, comparing is based on an inherent

43 For deeper insights into how practices of comparing work, cf. Ulrike Davy/Antje Flüchter (eds.), *Imagining Unequals, Imagining Equals. Concepts of Equality in History and Law*, Bielefeld 2022; Willibald Steinmetz (ed.), *The Force of Comparison: A New Perspective on Modern European History and the Contemporary World*, New York/Oxford 2019.

44 It is not mandatory to proceed in this way. When drawing comparisons, it's possible to come up with a new category.

mental operation relating the entities of comparison with respect to the *tertium comparationis*. What's more, comparing also sets a dynamic within the comparing context in motion.

A brief example may illustrate the thesis: in order to compare the faith of people deported from Africa to the Americas and inhabitants of the Americas, contemporaries in sixteenth-century Europe presupposed that the groups could be attributed or denied faith (assumption of similarity).⁴⁵ In the next step, they specified differences and resemblances. If one follows the argumentation of contemporary Christians, Africans were heretics—that is, apostates from the faith. According to the argumentation of the lettered Christians, it was tenable to enslave heretics. However, the inhabitants of the Americas had not yet had the opportunity to encounter the Christian faith. Therefore, one should stay clear of classifying them as heretics and, consequently, refrain from enslaving them.

The comparative context in which the actor becomes enmeshed when drawing comparisons disappears behind the supposedly neutral practice of comparing. A comparison may indicate similarities (“It holds true for both Africans and Americans: they are infidels”). Mainly, however, comparative practices aim at elaborating differences between entities that may fall into the same category (assumption of similarity; e.g. “all entities possess the property that one can meaningfully speak about them encountering the Christian faith”) and proving the differences evident (“A has fallen away from faith; B does not know the Christian God”). Those who argue in this way emphasize the differences between these two groups, and simultaneously imply that the group to whom they, the comparators, belong is different again from the two groups being compared. Such a grouping can trigger different dynamics: a person included with the group of heretics, for example, may try to escape the attribution to free himself from slavery. *Limpieza de sangre*, i.e., “blood purity,” was a classification created during the Spanish Reconquista in the 15th century to prevent people with ancestors of Jewish or Muslim faith from becoming civil servants in the Spanish Empire. In the course of the conquest of the Americas, this classification was reinterpreted. Since Amerindians had not been classified as heretics, they would in theory have had the opportunity to prove “blood purity”. However, their disastrous living conditions hardly changed.⁴⁶ To accomplish convergence regard-

45 In the so-called Valladolid debate (1550–1551), Las Casas and Sepúlveda go back to Aristotle and discuss the distinction between what Aristotle called “natural slaves” and people that have been enslaved during war times. For a more profound elaboration, cf. Angelika Eppler, *Comparing Europe and the Americas*, in: Willibald Steinmetz (ed.), *The Force of Comparison. A new perspective on modern European history and the contemporary world*, New York/Oxford 2019, 137–163.

46 Alin Helg, *Slave but not Citizen. Free People of Color and Blood Purity in Colonial Spanish American Legislation*, 2017, 76–99, esp. 93; Angelika Eppler, *Inventing White Beauty and Fighting Black Slavery. How Blumenbach, Humboldt, and Arango y Parreño Con-*

ing the characteristics attributed to the other group, a process is thus set in motion. At the same time, the privileged group will try to reinforce the differences and make the other group's transition from *enslaved* to *free* more difficult. I will come back to this below.

Power relations characterize the context of comparing practices, and comparing does all too often stabilize both. Whoever brings forth the comparison sets the standard. As early as 1609, Inca Garcilaso clairvoyantly called all comparisons “odioso,” i.e., hateful.⁴⁷ In colonial relations, comparative practices are an instrument of domination—particularly evident with the introduction of numerical comparisons in population statistics. Against the backdrop of the revolution in Haiti, measures were in demand to ensure enslaved Africans wouldn't threaten the white minority. The potential transition from the group of enslaved Africans to the group of free Africans increasingly appeared to pose a threat to white elites. Discursive and numerical comparative practices legitimized relations of violence and domination. The underlying rationale was that using statistics could safeguard more effectively that Blacks never outnumbered Whites in the population.⁴⁸

In the Caribbean, legitimizing and maintaining power relations were closely linked to comparative practices. Especially the argumentation used to justify the inhumane working conditions of enslaved Africans shines a light on the particular circumstances. As it happened, the region saw the implementation of a comparative practice that had been practiced in Europe for centuries: African people were better able to cope with the specific climatic conditions than the elites from Europe. Brought into effect again, the above-mentioned practice formation cited the established comparative relation of climate, gender, and origin/race. Elements of early-modern humorism, medical argumentations from antiquity, and contemporary gender-specific stereotypes overlapped with the contemporary political and economic situation in the Caribbean.

In colonial contexts, we can observe that differences draw the most attention, and discern that the subversive power of the similarity assumption gets relegated to the background. However, when people—often especially in relations of oppression—emphasize an underlying assumption of similarity (we are all human) or similarities despite existing differences (the differences within a group are greater than

tributed to Cuban Race Comparisons in the Long Nineteenth Century, in: Epple, Angelika/ Erhart, Walter/Grave, Johannes (eds.), *Practices of Comparing. Towards a New Understanding of a Fundamental Human Practice*, Bielefeld 2020, 294–328.

47 Inca Garcilaso de la Vega, *Primera Parte de los Comentarios Reales*, 56.

48 Francisco de Arango y Parreño, a Cuban economist, enslaver, and friend of Wilhelm von Humboldt, repeatedly pointed out that he saw the ratio of enslaved and free People of Color to Whites as crucial for preventing rebellions. Cf., for example, Rafael Arango, *Obras completas* 2, 1889 (1832), 339.

those between groups), it becomes clear that comparing bears the potential to question existing power relations.⁴⁹

Comparative practices are an instrument of domination in colonial contexts and, therefore, as in the example of the Americas, are usually embedded in global relations. However, non-colonial comparative practices are also particularly likely to produce globalizing effects. Numerous studies in the social sciences show how comparative practices have incited globalizing effects within various segments of society—the arms race during the Cold War and university rankings are just two catchy examples.⁵⁰ Studies in diverse fields ranging from historiography to literary studies to sociology and political science have shown that comparative practices play a significant role in global change.⁵¹

Although there may be other practices to which globalizing effects are attributed, we can safely assume that comparative practices are centrally involved in the processes of globalization. Comparative practices put similarities, resemblances, and differences into relation and set processes in motion such as as, for one, drawing distinctions or bringing about convergence and, for another, accomplishing connectedness or establishing disconnectedness. Hence, they fuel—often in a contradictory way—globalization/s.

49 Stephanie Zehnle, Between 'Cannibals' and 'Natural Freemasons': The (Anti)Colonial History of Comparing Freemasonry to African Secret Societies, in: Eleonora Rohland et al. (eds.), *Contact, Conquest and Colonization. How Practices of Comparing Shaped Empires and Colonialism around the World*, New York/London 2021, 312–331.

50 Thomas Müller, The Politicisation of Comparisons. The East-West Dispute over Military Force Comparisons in the Cold War, in: Angelika Epple/Walter Erhart/Johannes Grave (eds.), *Practices of Comparing. Towards a New Understanding of a Fundamental Human Practice*, Bielefeld 2020, 329–347; Bettina Heintz/Tobias Werron, Wie ist Globalisierung möglich? Zur Entstehung globaler Vergleichs-horizonte am Beispiel von Wissenschaft und Sport, in: *Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie* 63 (2011), 359–394; Wendy Nelson Espeland/Michael Sauder, Rankings and Reactivity. How Public Measures Recreate Social Worlds, in: *American Journal of Sociology* 113 (1/2007), 1–40.

51 Willibald Steinmetz, Above/below, better/worse, or simply different? Metamorphoses of Social Comparison, 1600–1900, in: Willibald Steinmetz (ed.), *The Force of Comparison. A New Perspective on Modern European and the Contemporary World*, New York/Oxford 2019, 80–112; Andreas Becker/Anna Luise Dönecke/Antje Flüchter, *Von Nordeuropa nach Südindien: Vergleichspraktiken auf dem Feld des Rechts in frühneuzeitlichen Kontaktzonen*, Bielefeld 2020; Antje Flüchter/Cornelia Aust/Claudia Jarzebowski, *Verglichene Körper. Normieren, Urteilen, Entrecht in der Vormoderne*, Stuttgart 2022.

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