

# Contact – Conquest – Colonization

## Practices of Comparing between Europe, Africa, Asia and the Americas, from Antiquity to Present

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Bielefeld University was recently awarded a major national grant for a collaborative research center (*Sonderforschungsbereich*) on “Practices of Comparing,” which brings together an interdisciplinary group of scholars from five different faculties (history, literature, philosophy, law, and political sciences). With projects ranging historically from antiquity to the twenty-first century and spatially from Europe to Southern India, West Africa, the Philippines and the Americas, our overarching aim is to uncover the dynamic force of practices of comparing for macro-scale historical transformation processes. We are hence shedding light on contexts within which comparison occurs, and on their role in processes of historical change, rather than looking at comparison as a method – a nuance that makes an important difference.

Within the context of this interdisciplinary research program, several groups work on instances of European, American, and Asian cultural contact, conquest, and/ or colonization, which seem to be particularly pertinent contexts to research practices of comparing. In getting to terms with the astounding and novel “realities” of Asian, African, and American cultures, Europeans drew on the ancient canon of knowledge and *topoi* that had emerged in the context of contact and conquest of Greek antiquity in order to describe cultural phenomena.

In the fields of history and literature, scholars such as Ann Laura Stoler, Anthony Pagden, Stephen Greenblatt, Anthony Grafton, Ottmar Ette, Frank Lestringant, Alexander Honold, and Antonello Gerbi have shed light on different aspects of European perceptions and comparisons in the New World. Edward Said’s seminal *Orientalism* (1978) as well as other postcolonial studies stressed the importance of ‘othering’ and put the category of difference in the center of historical analysis. We believe that it is time to go a step further. That is, when focusing on the ‘doing of comparisons,’ not only do we ask for the making of differences but for the negotiation of similarities and differences.

Until now, research on practices of comparing in the context of cultural contact, conquest, and colonization has remained fractured, not least because of disciplinary restraints such as the separation of epochs, geographical foci, and language barriers. It needs to be asked, for example, whether and how discourses such as the *Querelle des anciens et des modernes* and the “Dispute of the New World” (Gerbi) of the eighteenth century are related and whether and in what way elements of those earlier instances reappear in the civilizational discourse of nineteenth-century imperialism.

With this conference, we would therefore like to bring together scholars studying practices of comparing in situations of cultural contact, conquest, and colonization in different parts of the

world, throughout all historical epochs – antiquity to present – and across disciplines. In this context, we are primarily (but not exclusively) interested in themes such as

Anthropological and ethnographic discourses  
Christian missions  
Legal practice and discourses  
Literary genres and cultural narratives  
War reports  
Diplomacy  
Discourses about natural environments/ climate/ geography  
Discourses of barbarianism and civilization  
Discourses of good governance vs. despotism  
The emergence of scientific fields  
Perceptions of bodies and emotions  
Medical knowledge and practice  
Medial and artefactual representations

With this international conference, we aim to create a conversation between historical epochs as well as between different disciplines studying cultural contact, conquest, and colonization under the overarching theme of practices of comparing, which may otherwise not get to speak to each other or even know of each other.

If you are interested in participating, please send an abstract of no more than one page to [leonora.rohland@uni-bielefeld.de](mailto:leonora.rohland@uni-bielefeld.de) until **April 30, 2018**, detailing the role of practices of comparison for your research focus. Elected participants will be **notified by May 15, 2018**. We will cover your travel and accommodation expenses to and in Bielefeld.

We are looking forward to your applications!

For more information on the collaborative research center go to:  
[http://www.uni-bielefeld.de/\(en\)/sfb1288/index.html](http://www.uni-bielefeld.de/(en)/sfb1288/index.html)

For more information on the organizers go to:

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