

Comparative Gender History. Northern and Western Europe in the 20th Century: An Introduction

This issue of *Comparativ* contributes to the comparative history of Europe in the 20th century. It contains a collection of international contributions on *Gender Comparisons* between Northern and Western European countries. The articles presented here have a twofold aim: First, as regards content, to bridge the gap between Northern and Western European historical research; and second, as regards methodology and theory, to make a contribution to the comparative study of history and of gender, as well as to the overall understanding of gender in European contemporary history. For the purpose of pursuing both aims, and in what could be considered very rare for a collection of articles, all authors apply a genuine comparative approach, i.e. they use the comparison of two countries, based on source material, as a method to gain further insights into how modern societies work.

Context

Today, the majority of the Nordic countries are members of the EU. This makes it an urgent matter to arrive at both a revised and broader international understanding of this part of Europe. Even more important, it makes it necessary to challenge the widespread preconception of the Nordic countries as differing decisively from the rest of Europe – an idea, which has proved to be very influential within gender research, especially in studies working on the premise of an outstanding ‘Nordic gender model’.

Both, in research as well as in politics, the Nordic countries are often regarded as having the world’s best and most developed ‘welfare state model’¹ as well as ‘gender model’². However a ‘Nordic gender model’ only exists as

1 Cf. e.g. Gøsta Esping-Andersen, *The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism*, Cambridge 1990; Stephan Leibfried, *Towards a European Welfare State?*, in: Catherine Jones (ed.), *New Perspectives on the Welfare State in Europe*, London, New York 1993, pp. 133-156.

2 For more detailed information: Swedish Secretariat for Social Research (ed.), *Genus*, no. 1 (2001) (Special issue on gender equality research). On the Beijing Women’s Conference in 1995, e.g., the UN declared Sweden to be the “most gender equal country in the world”. Cf. Mimmi Palm, *Sweden best at gender equality?*, in: *ibid.*, pp. 3-4.

a political ideal. As societal reality, it is non-existent. To continue with the notion of a 'Nordic gender model' placed at the top of international rankings is problematic for two main reasons. Firstly, a particular 'gender model' is the result of a specific historical development. Regarding it as a utopian goal for Europe, neglects historically diverse developments and their interrelations. Moreover, positive aspects of existing other 'gender models' are likely to be overlooked, as are gender problems within the Nordic countries.³ Quotation, e.g., is a political practice in the US, Western Europe and in Sweden. However, up to the present day, it is not considered a legitimate equal opportunity tool in Denmark. Moreover, women's share in management positions in France and their share in professorships in Turkey are significantly higher than in the Nordic countries. Such examples illustrate that there is no point in clinging to the dichotomy of a 'progressive' North and a 'latecomer' Middle Europe, when we talk about equal opportunities in terms of gender. Rather, examples like these suggest the necessity of drawing a more differentiated picture. Secondly, the notion of a 'Nordic gender model' transfers the idea of the nation state to a supranational level. The fact that neither the 'North' nor nation states are natural, hegemonic entities but rather historical constructions, and as such 'imagined communities' (Benedict Anderson), is not taken into consideration. 'The North' is no cultural or political unit, though this is often stressed within the Nordic countries themselves as part of a self-awareness which dissociates itself from 'Europe'.⁴ This is not to say that differences within the Nordic countries are not acknowledged. So does recent Scandinavian research, for instance, document a higher level of gender equality in Sweden and Norway than in Denmark and Finland.⁵ How-

3 Cf. Kaj Fölster, Vorbild für die Europäische Union? Frauenpolitik in Schweden, in: Melanie Piepenschneider (ed.), *Frauenpolitik in der Europäischen Union. Beiträge einer Tagung des Arbeitskreises Europäische Integration e.V. und der Vertretung der Europäischen Kommission in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland*, 6. bis 7. April 1995 in Bonn, Baden-Baden 1995, pp. 101-105.

4 Cf. Bernd Henningsen, *Mentalität, Identität, Nationalität. Die Skandinavier auf der Suche nach dem, was sie sind*, in: Hans Schottmann (ed.), *Arbeiten zur Skandinavistik. II. Arbeitstagung der deutschsprachigen Skandinavistik*, Münster 1994, pp. 400-416; Nordic Council (ed.), *Norden är död. Länge leve Norden! En debattbok om de nordiska länderna som „megaregion“ i Europa*, Copenhagen 1994; Øystein Sørensen/Bo Stråth (eds.), *The Cultural Construction of Norden*, Oslo 1997; Bo Stråth, *Folkhemmet mot Europa. Ett historiskt perspektiv på 90-talet*, Stockholm 1992. This collective Nordic self-image is also demonstrated in the common embassy building of Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden in Berlin.

5 Solveig Bergmann (ed.), *Equal Democracies? Gender and Politics in the Nordic Countries*, Oslo 1999; Kirsten Gomard/Anne Krogstad (eds.), *Instead of the ideal de-*

ever, this does not result in a principal revision of the dichotomous notion of a Nordic versus a middle European 'gender model'. Nevertheless, until the mid 1980s, Norwegian child care and family politics, for instance, show a greater resemblance to (West) German politics than to the politics of other Nordic countries.⁶ Findings like these make the notion of a Nordic "mega-region"⁷ appeal even more questionable.

Therefore, instead of continuing with the notion of a cultural unit 'North', the following *Gender Comparisons* emphasise both, the differences and similarities *between* Northern and Western European countries as well as the diversity *within* both groups. By applying a historical perspective, they show clearly that the contrast between 'progressive' Northern European and 'conservative' or 'late comer' Western European countries appears even less true when we look back at the long-term development of these countries during the last century. Instead, the *diversity* of historical developments in Europe becomes evident, as it does both within Northern and Western Europe. Our aim is not at least to enlarge the empirical knowledge about the history of North European countries in Germany and elsewhere and to bridge the gap between North and West European research and researchers.

Method

The studies presented here have two essential approaches in common: the historical perspective on Northern and Western Europe in the 20th century, and a genuine comparison as a method of analysis. A genuine comparative approach uses the comparison of two or more countries (or regions) as a means to gain further insights into how societies function. Hence, taking a certain research question as a point of departure, source material from the respective countries is collected, investigated and put into equivalent contexts.

Comparative approaches have been adopted by historians from the social sciences, which try to develop typologies and methods of comparison,⁸ while

bate. Doing politics and doing gender in Nordic political campaign discourse, Århus 2001.

6 On Norway: Tora Korsvold, *Profesjonalisert barndom. Statlige intensjoner og kvinnelig praksis på barnehagens arena 1945-90*, Trondheim 1997. On West Germany: Wiebke Kolbe, *Elternschaft im Wohlfahrtsstaat. Schweden und die Bundesrepublik im Vergleich 1945-2000*, Frankfurt/Main, New York 2002.

7 Nordic Council, *Norden* (note 4).

8 See e.g. Klaus von Beyme, *Der Vergleich in der Politikwissenschaft*, München 1988; Jürgen Hartmann, *Vergleichende Politikwissenschaft. Ein Lehrbuch*, Frankfurt a. M. 1995; Stefan Immerfall, *Einführung in den europäischen Gesellschaftsvergleich. Ansätze, Problemstellungen, Befunde*. Passau 1994; Birgit Pfau-Effinger, *Kultur und*

historians usually tend to a more heuristic but still theoretically and methodologically reflected use of comparisons.⁹ Another approach, originating from literary critics and cultural studies, has gained increasing attention in European historical research during the last decade, when we have faced the 'cultural turn' in history: the cultural transfer approach. It deals with *processes* of transfer, i.e. the adoption, adaptation ('Aneignung') or even restriction of cultural goods, knowledge, ideas, practices, and their actors, beyond national and cultural borders.¹⁰ Some advocates of the transfer approach criticise comparative research for confirming existing frontiers and supposedly national (and supranational) 'Sonderwege' rather than deconstructing them. Only if comparative research includes aspects of a cultural transfer approach, they argue, this danger may be avoided.¹¹ However, in recent research, both approaches have been combined more often, partly due to a growing awareness of this methodological problem, partly due to the increasing impact of cultural history.

Frauenenerwerbstätigkeit in Europa. Theorie und Empirie des internationalen Vergleichs, Opladen 2000.

- 9 E.g. Heinz-Gerhard Haupt/Jürgen Kocka (eds.), *Geschichte und Vergleich. Ansätze und Ergebnisse international vergleichender Geschichtsschreibung*, Frankfurt/Main, New York 1996; Hartmut Kaelble, *Der historische Vergleich. Eine Einführung zum 19. und 20. Jahrhundert*, Frankfurt a. M./New York 1999; Jürgen Osterhammel, *Sozialgeschichte im Zivilisationsvergleich. Zu künftigen Möglichkeiten komparativer Geschichtswissenschaft*, in: *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 22 (1996), pp. 143-164. For an early approach see the 'classic' Marc Bloch, *For a comparative history of European societies*, in: *Revue de synthèse*, 1928, no. 46, pp. 15-50. For interdisciplinary approaches cf. Hartmut Kaelble/Jürgen Schriewer (eds.), *Diskurse und Entwicklungspfade. Der Gesellschaftsvergleich in den Geschichts- und Sozialwissenschaften*, Frankfurt/Main 1999.
- 10 E.g. Michel Espagne/Michael Werner, *Deutsch-französischer Kulturtransfer im 18. und 19. Jahrhundert. Zu einem neuem Forschungsprogramm des C.N.R.S.*, in: *Francia* 13 (1985), pp. 502-512; Lothar Jordan/Bernd Kortländer (eds.), *Nationale Grenzen und internationaler Austausch. Studien zum Kultur- und Wissenschaftstransfer in Europa*, Tübingen 1995; Rudolf Muhs/Johannes Paulmann/Willibald Steinmetz (eds.), *Aneignung und Abwehr. Interkultureller Transfer zwischen Deutschland und Großbritannien im 19. Jahrhundert*, Bodenheim 1998.
- 11 Michel Espagne, *Sur les limites du comparatisme en histoire culturelle*, in: *Genèses* 17 (1994), pp. 112-121; Johannes Paulmann, *Internationaler Vergleich und interkultureller Transfer. Zwei Forschungsansätze zur europäischen Geschichte des 18. bis 20. Jahrhunderts*, in: *Historische Zeitschrift* 267 (1998), pp. 649-685, esp. pp. 667 ff. For the debate between the two approaches see also Hartmut Kaelble, *Die interdisziplinären Debatten über Vergleich und Transfer*, in: H. Kaelble/Jürgen Schriewer (eds.), *Vergleich und Transfer. Komparatistik in den Sozial-, Geschichts- und Kulturwissenschaften*, Frankfurt a. M./New York 2003, pp. 469-495.

Although the mentioned critique is certainly justified, it has to be emphasised that comparative research nevertheless has an enormous potential. In spite of the wide-spread conviction about its theoretical and empirical values, there is still too little comparative research done in history. This holds even more true for gender history, where the number of respective empirical studies is still rather limited, and a methodological discussion about the epistemological and empirical advantages and pitfalls of comparative and transfer research has not even started. However, comparative gender history gives us a better understanding of both the gendered construction of societies and of concepts of gender.¹² It contributes to transgressing essentialist ideas of gender, since it makes particularly clear that gender is a culturally constructed category, and sheds light on the mechanisms and contexts of this construction.

The four contributions will exemplify the empirical insights gained from comparative gender history. This issue of *Comparativ* is edited with the objective of providing new insights into the development and variety of contents and meanings of gender concepts and of gendered structures in society on the one hand, and into a sample of European countries on the other. This common aim is pursued in different ways by the respective authors. Methodologists of comparative history use to distinguish between two types of comparative research: contrasting approaches, shedding light upon national differences and particularities, and generalising approaches, stressing similarities and improving the understanding of general developments applying to a majority of societies.¹³ Most comparative studies contain aspects of both approaches, although often stressing one above the other. Of the gender comparisons presented here, the contributions of Johanna Kantola, Elisabeth Elgán and Maren Wichmann use a clearly contrasting perspective, though with the latter two stressing some striking similarities between the respective countries. Iris Rittenhofer applies a more generalising perspective in her article. In spite of their different approaches, all contributions reveal the processes by which modern European societies are gendered, and the different or similar meanings gender can take on in European history.

12 The term 'gender' is used here according to the classic definition of Joan W. Scott, *Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis*, in: J. W. Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History*, New York 1988, pp. 28-50.

13 Cf. Heinz-Gerhard Haupt/Jürgen Kocka, *Historischer Vergleich: Methoden, Aufgaben, Probleme. Eine Einleitung*, in: Haupt/Kocka (eds.), *Geschichte und Vergleich* (note 9), pp. 9-45, here p. 11; Kaelble, *Der historische Vergleich* (note 9), pp. 26-35.

Contributions

The editors and authors are younger scholars from Germany and the Nordic Countries. The subjects cover a variety of themes reconsidered from the perspective of genuine comparisons: tax politics, leadership and the 'glass ceiling', the gendered access to the state as well as abortion and contraception politics. A fruitful combination of both a cultural transfer and a genuine comparative approach is used in Iris Rittenhofer's contribution. The cultural representations of gender in West Germany, Denmark, Britain and Finland are covered by Iris Rittenhofer and Johanna Kantola. Elisabeth Elgán and Maren Wichmann deal with the gendering welfare states in Sweden, France, (West) Germany and Denmark.

In *Abortion and Contraception Politics*, the faith in medical science as a guideline for social measures and as a social rescue were present in both *Sweden and France*. Elisabeth Elgán presents a comparative study on how these measures gained different meanings. Due to those countries' widely differing political cultures, abortion politics were shaped in quite different ways at the dawn of the French and Swedish welfare states. However different the politics and their contexts were, though: they were based on similar concepts of gender (relations).

Maren Wichmann performs a comparison of how *Tax Politics and Women's Equality* are related in *Denmark and Germany*. Since the 1920s and until today, tax laws not only served the needs of the labour market. Tax law reforms empowered as well images of the morally acceptable ways of living a family life. In both countries, married women were reputed to be the manoeuvrable mass and the target of amending laws. Wichmann addresses the question as to why the principle of individual taxation eventually succeeded in Denmark, but not in Germany. She shows that tax politics were used in both countries as an instrument for the regulation not only of the labour market, but also of gender relations and family living. Her study challenges the notion of a 'progressive' Danish and a 'conservative' German policy.

Johanna Kantola's comparative study on *Britain and Finland* not only gives important insights into the self-images of these countries. Moreover, her study on *Gender and the Discursive Construction of the Access to the State* challenges influential international theories on the strategies of contemporary women's movements. She shows how dominant discourses about the state actually shape women's access to and engagement in these states. Women's activists' strategies cannot be reduced to either integration or autonomy. Rather, Kantola reveals how dominant perceptions of these states either limit or create the space for the empowerment of women. Moreover,

she makes a strong case for the fact that dominant theories, in this case those of feminist oriented political scientists, are themselves cultural representations. Thus, she challenges well established scientific 'truths'.

Iris Rittenhofer focuses on contemporary *West Germany and Denmark as Centered Societies*. However, Rittenhofer does not limit the concept of transfer to the study of nation but applies it to other categories as well. In the case of her study on the making and the transformations of equal opportunities in the post war economies of both countries, she does not treat 'man' and 'woman', 'entrepreneur' and 'manager' as distinct and differing categories. Instead, she introduces the concepts 'gender' and 'leader' as 'parallel categories'. Rittenhofer offers an original re-think of the widely and self-evidently used terms 'mass education' and 'the glass ceiling'.

Conclusion

The *Gender Comparisons* presented direct our scholarly attention towards the differences between Northern and Western European countries. However, they direct it at least as much towards the diversities among the Nordic countries on the one hand, and the Western European ones on the other. They advise us to focus on the diversities of these countries as well as on their contextual similarities. This suggests a more careful use of the framework of the 'Nordic gender model'.

Historicizing and contextualising gender in genuine comparative research may serve as an eye opener for our understanding of the EU-member states. One question for future research in gender and the history of Europe in the 20th century might be whether, and in what respects, we could speak of a 'European gender model'. The social sciences have asked this question, but by applying a historical perspective, we would come to different conclusions and shed light on the long-term-development, as well as on the question of a possible path dependency of European gender conditions.¹⁴ Thus, this issue of *Comparativ* contributes to a vivid debate, within research on the EU, as well as in EU-politics: whether and to what degree the politics and the organisations of one society may be transferred to other countries. Equally important, it raises the question whether this would be desirable.

With these *Gender Comparisons*, we also want to encourage future research that is not limited by concepts of national or supranational units as pre-established, distinct entities; a research which transgresses a priori concepts such as gender or nation.

14 On the concept of path dependency see Pfau-Effinger, Kultur (note 8).