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METHODS IN TRANSREGIONAL STUDIES

Intercultural transfers

Antje Dietze and Matthias Middell

A fully developed set of methods often define a well-established discipline. It is therefore no wonder that transregional studies, being in its infant stages and continuously exposed to serious quarrels about its subject, are not yet at the point where such a complete methodology is available. This has to do with at least three points:

- (1) Area studies, on which transregional perspectives are based to a great degree, took different pathways in their development – depending on the place and national academic context. Through this development, area studies came under the influence of anthropology, social sciences, or history. In some cases, these intellectual inspirations came together in a coordinated way, but more often than not area studies have presented themselves as *mixtum compositum* with a large and rather unorganized toolkit in which contrasting disciplinary approaches remain unreconciled.
- (2) Transregional studies are part of a broader intellectual movement, starting from the assumption that interactions between societies are no less important and influential than those within societies. This assumption clashes with what previous social science research emphasized, namely a national framework of analysis. As a consequence, methodological nationalism came under critique and a space opened for increasingly nuanced investigations of border-crossing and border-transcending phenomena.
- (3) Such interactions across the boundaries of seemingly stable spatial entities (territories) drew additional inspiration from the spatial turn that taught researchers to see space as the product of human interaction. Therefore, transregional studies research has investigated such intersocietal interaction not as occurring between fixed entities but, on the contrary, as producing new spatial constellations. However, since methods have often been developed in reference to particular spatial frameworks, the discovery and analysis of new spatial formats remain difficult tasks.

Each of these points is addressed in sections of this handbook and shall not be argued more extensively here. But taken together, it becomes clear that there are, for the time being, more discouraging challenges than satisfying answers. Even the term ‘method’ might be a matter of dispute. It might refer to very different epistemological points of departure, where realities are observed with the help of well-defined methods in order to understand their objective

character, or where scholars will, rather, insist on multiperspectivity and the implication of placing him- or herself into these perspectives. Likewise, preferences between empirical depth and theoretical abstraction differ widely. Accordingly, it is important to remember that it is not necessary that all scholars in transregional studies share the same basic assumptions and methodologies.

That being said, it does not mean that we are without any lessons on how 'to do' transregional studies; these lessons have been learned from excellent scholarship that is already published and from an extensive theoretical debate about what transregional studies should be and where these trends can lead us. The method of intercultural transfer provides an especially insightful entry point not only into a variety of transregional interactions, but also into the methodological debates on how to study them.

The legacy of comparison

Comparative historiography – particularly prominent in the 1970s and 1980s when coming into contact with comparative sociology (Przeworski and Teune 1970; Skocpol 1984) and the then newly emerging subdiscipline of international relations called comparative politics (Lim 2006) – forms a solid basis for the more recent interest in transregional studies. Exploring so far neglected areas, transregional studies aimed at using such regional case studies for generalizations based upon a more and more sophisticated methodology. Proponents insisted on its cosmopolitan agenda, seeing themselves as forerunners of transnational and global studies (Haupt and Kocka 2009). Notwithstanding, this view has aroused substantial criticism that has pointed out that comparison as practised in the social sciences and historiography over the twentieth century has contributed much more to the essentialization of (national) borders than to their transcendence. According to the critique, comparison tends to invent, out of necessity, the entities it compares instead of asking what might constitute them and how they are co-constituted by interaction (Espagne 1994). In fact, when reading Marc Bloch's famous keynote for the International Congress of Historical Sciences in 1928 one becomes aware that even the pioneer of historical comparison brought a lot of paradoxical distance between himself and naive confrontational comparison. He insists on two arguments. The first is that the ideal comparative approach can only be applied to two or more societies that have nothing in common and are not bound to each other by connections and interactions. When Bloch refers to situations far back in history, the historian of medieval times indirectly makes clear that such a condition cannot be met in more recent times. The second is that he strengthened this argument by pointing out that the language with which scholars describe and analyse the two or more cases to be compared is necessarily infected by the experience of one (or both) of these cases and thus necessarily not neutral as assumed by many comparatists (Bloch 1928).

This is particularly true for comparisons between Western societies – dominating the categories with which current scholarship tends to study societal phenomena – and 'the Rest'; this had already been shown for the English-French comparison of Middle Age economic history Bloch had in mind. Others have argued that such a normative bias is not necessarily part of the comparative strategy or have proposed 'reciprocal comparison' as a solution to the problem. This means, for example, not to take Europe but Africa as the point of departure for a comparative design so that the normative load of categories used is turned upside down. Instead of observing states failing in Africa when measured against states functioning in Europe, the question should be how African societies deal with certain challenges and to ask further how their European counterparts react to similar problems (Austin 2007). Kenneth Pomeranz suggests a similar scenario for new approaches to the 'Great Divergence' – the debate among

economic historians about the causes and consequences of the different performance of societies in Asia and Europe during the period between proto-industrialization, in the late eighteenth century, and the mid-twentieth century (Pomeranz 2000; see also Chapter 24 in this volume, by Rössner). But changing the direction of comparison does not solve the fundamental problem that comparative studies remain somehow incompatible with the aim of transnational and transregional studies to emphasize the interaction between people from different locations, be it nation-states or regions.

This resulted in a decade-long quarrel about the relationship between the study of connections and comparison. The formula many scholars nowadays prefer is that the study of connections and comparison complement rather than exclude each other. This, in our view, describes a stalemate rather than a well-developed solution for a dilemma with which everyone who studies border-transcending processes is confronted. Jürgen Osterhammel once insisted on the fundamental difference between the two approaches when decontextualizing for the purpose of generalization (comparison) or recontextualizing with the aim to better understand the co-constitution of seemingly different entities (Osterhammel 2003). But the two methodological approaches are not only different; they are also dependent on each other. First, intercultural transfer always starts with a comparative look at foreign configurations and achievements by the involved actors in order to identify those references they would like to incorporate into their own culture. Comparison – which is an everyday practice and should not be reduced to what some social scientists consider a tool for producing objectivity – is thus a part of the historical phenomenon that is analysed as intercultural transfer. Second, even though specific intercultural transfers can be isolated for analytical purposes, they overlap, conflict, and mix up with others occurring at the same time. The comparison of intercultural transfers has led to the discovery of triple and quadruple configurations of transfers, meaning multisided interactions between several communities or societies that, in the end, might add up to the notion of an interconnected world.

The main conclusion of the debate was that in contrast to a naive comparison, which took its units of analysis for granted, the investigation of interactions between societies and its relationship to the study of bounded spatial formations such as empires, nation-states, or regions has to be conceptualized in a much more nuanced way. It also became clear that such interactions produce new spaces and are not likely to solely follow predetermined pathways within given spatial frames (Middell 2018).

Intercultural transfer between France and Germany

It was long before the hype around words such as transcultural, transnational, translocal, or transregional that the idea of intercultural transfer was developed. When the empirical investigation of intercultural transfers first took shape in the mid-1980s, it was above all about the rediscovery of entanglements between national cultures. The central idea of Michel Espagne and Michael Werner (1987) was to give priority to the study of all kinds of foreign cultural elements in one's own culture – including the actors and media involved with cultural appropriation – instead of following a diffusionist paradigm. The two French cultural historians and specialists of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century German literature further strengthen this agenda by not taking the influence of dominant French culture over other cultural spaces as a starting point, but by initially focusing on the construction of references to German culture in France. A new interest in mutual interactions between cultures grew, and the more empirical studies on different kinds of transfers were available, the clearer it became that the selection of what is appropriated depends on tangible actors of transfer becoming interested in the 'foreign' and having a chance

to act as intermediaries. These cultural brokers feel encouraged to invest their time and capacities in the ‘discovery’ of something they consider missing in their own culture and to argue for its inclusion. Mastering different languages and a variety of media for translation plus often (but not always) a high degree of mobility across borders qualified them as intermediaries (for more details, see Chapter 53 by Dietze).

The term ‘transfer’ has sometimes led to misunderstandings, especially in the German- and English-speaking worlds, where it resulted in confusion in relation to diffusionist approaches. Yet it was intended to place emphasis on the active reinterpretation and transformation of foreign cultural elements in host cultures. The paradox of intercultural transfer, however, is that what was perceived as foreign and what attracted curiosity in the first place – exactly because it seemed to be foreign – is often considered later as having belonged to the host culture for a very long time or even forever. The typical cycle of intercultural transfer follows here: it first starts with the insistence on a deficiency in the culture at home, which inspires the search in other cultures for something that could fill the identified gap. In a second step, translation and mediation take place. And in a third and final step, integration into or adaptation to the new context occurs. Each step can be isolated for analytical purposes, and such studies help us to understand the particular role of cultural brokers, media, semiotics, and societal recontextualization.

When the method of intercultural transfer was applied to other cases – first to interactions of more European cultures, and then to other world regions – its origin in the study of German and French cultural encounters in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries raised concerns. The most problematic aspect was the assumption – relatively obvious for France and Germany but more disputable in other contexts – that cultures are relatively distinct entities that enter into contact as foreign with each other. For several reasons, both French and Germans have for a long time imagined their cultures as relatively homogeneous and as being the product of a long-lasting history while neglecting the effects of cultural contacts, imperial and transnational relations, and migration. This national homogenization was in both cases supported by the emergence of a sophisticated infrastructure consisting of broad and differentiated cultural industries and media systems, as well as state subsidies for producers of cultural artefacts. Not least important is the monolingual character of these cultures, even when considering the role of the many minority or regional languages and dialects for the support, and sometimes the dispute, of the nationalizing culture by different subcultures. While the state played a very different role in this process in France and Germany, the result was the same: cultures that were perceived both from inside and outside as well defined and strongly related to a fully territorialized nation-state.

The impetus of the intercultural transfer approach, however, is to deconstruct this notion of homogeneous national cultures and to rediscover their hybridity. It demonstrates that references to other cultures play a fundamental role in the management of both internal differences and of external boundaries of these national cultures, and that they co-constitute each other in dynamic interactions. But still, the Franco-German entanglements took place between relatively distinct and territorialized cultural spaces. The question whether this was rather an exceptional case or the rule and whether this particular point of departure of intercultural transfer analysis limits its wider application has engaged a widespread debate and led to further adaptations of the concept.

From the transnational to the transregional

Building on the achievements of the discussion about intercultural transfers, Michael Werner and Bénédicte Zimmermann (2006) proposed *histoire croisée* as a new approach. They question the spatial and temporal units of analysis of comparison, transfer, and connection studies from a more

theoretical angle, arguing for a more open perspective that reconstructs the relevant spaces and scales from the situation of interaction itself. Drawing on these suggestions, other authors have argued that intercultural transfer should not be solely bound to transnational constellations. They consequently insist on the term translocality because such processes of exchange and appropriation include various kinds of connections beyond the local, as research on Africa, Asia, and the Middle East has shown (Freitag and von Oppen 2010). This provides nineteenth-century Western European nationalization in transregional processes a less prominent role while integrating those histories of cultural encounter that are not marked by strong and consequent territorialization. It does not, however, solve the problem of the spatial reach of 'culture'. Without any doubt, cultural phenomena can most easily be observed at the local level, but the local relates to very different spatial formats – from empire to nation-state, from trade networks to production chains, from virtual communities to diasporas, etc. The shift toward the translocal is important to overcome the priority that was given to the transnational in the early 2000s but helps also better understanding the impact of cultural encounter, exchange, and appropriation on transregional connections.

A different line of enquiry focuses on the concept(s) of culture as the basis for the study of intercultural transfer. When the approach was applied to colonial societies in the Americas, it added new empirical evidences to earlier attempts to overcome dichotomies between Europeans and indigenous people. Here, fundamentally different cultural constellations emerged, and the concept had to be adjusted to complex interactions between highly mixed, fragmented, and hybrid cultures (Turgeon, Delâge and Ouellet 1996). One example is the colonial intervention into the Caribbean, where, on the one hand, the autochthonous population was exterminated by epidemic diseases and warfare, and, on the other hand, the slave trade brought a massive influx of new people to the region, creating a sort of hybrid culture. Such processes of *métissage* raised scholarly attention not only as a region-specific phenomenon (Gruzinski 1999) but also as a fruitful metaphor to be used to conceptualize more recent effects of globalization on places of high mobility and on social groups that seem to be no longer territorially bound. Post-colonial concepts of cultural hybridity since the early 1990s tried to deepen multicultural awareness with this insistence on the co-presence of different groups due to the colonial past.

What we can see are two tendencies that are incorporated into the debate about hybridization and *métissage*. The first tendency educates us about massive regional differences concerning the homogeneity of cultures – or even the historical possibility to develop such homogeneity – and this can become the point of departure for further methodological consideration. Furthermore, it can serve as an invitation to overcome the normative trend toward the celebration of cultural homogeneity as the benchmark for all regions of the world and a teleological end in itself. The investigation of intercultural transfers has to be further nuanced in this regard.

The second tendency is inspired by the same post-colonial intention to no longer put Western European experience at the centre of world historical narratives and to no longer treat it as a norm for cultural politics. In a more generalized way, this reorientation has led to another trend that takes hybridization, diasporic forms of identification, and the recent focus on global mobility as a new cultural norm. It claims the emergence of transnational social spaces as the indicator of a fundamental change toward a world beyond territorialized identification and the homogenizing capacity of culture. While such expectations were widespread in the 1990s, they have encountered rising scepticism since, as opposition from the political left as well as from right-wing populists has grown against a globalization project that seems to make borders, territory, and related identification processes meaningless. Meanwhile, research on cultural interaction and globalization has increasingly focused on the fact that deterritorialization goes dialectically hand in hand with reterritorialization and that connections and transfers also produce new cultural boundaries, differences, and exclusions.

The question is therefore not if cultures *are* hybrid or homogeneous and if they allow people to protect themselves behind the walls of national or regional identities or to engage in cultural encounters. Instead, intercultural transfer analysis investigates who are the actors that promote the one or the other trend and what are their chances of being successful given the historical trajectories and societal conditions in the one or the other place and space.

A closer look at the agents and mediators of intercultural transfer can indeed open up new research avenues against this background of debates over its presumed spatial framework and cultural norms. It is probably in the empirical investigation of the particular actors and mechanisms of interaction that the intercultural transfer approach has its greatest strength. In investigating both the reinterpretation of foreign cultural elements and the conditions as well as agents and societal effects of this intermediation, the hermeneutics of cultural history are brought together with the tools specific to social history used to investigate professions, media, institutions, and the building of groups and milieus. In contrast to often vague descriptions of circulating ideas and cultural strands, which are difficult to pin down, the intercultural transfer approach highlights the role of individuals and particular social groups in the transfer itself. The study of such intermediaries became key to understanding intercultural transfer since it turned out to be much more difficult to start such an investigation from the result or from the beginning. The first is complicated because the foreign origins of the transferred cultural elements are often hidden after successful appropriation, and the second is troublesome since it is similarly problematic to decide whether the one or the other attempt to identify cultural features and models for transfer will, later, be successful or not. Focusing on the potential intermediaries in their efforts to make translation and dissemination a business, and investigating their biographical and societal background, also proved to be an efficient way to re-evaluate what relevant spaces and forms of culture are involved in the process of transfer.

This actor-centred perspective has become part of a larger 'biographical turn' in the study of transnationalism and transregionalism (see, e.g., Lambert and Lester 2006; Panter, Paulmann and Szöllösi-Janze 2015). Living between societies, territories, and cultures as a particular way of life has attracted scholarly interest as it opened up a whole sphere of social activity that had been formerly neglected in research. The discovery and exploration of a variety of intercultural transfers has ultimately contributed to the emergence of a social history of intermediation, mobility, and circulation. Investigating those actors living within and moving around different – and not necessarily territorially connected – spaces has also been used as an analytical tool to re-evaluate the scales and spaces of analysis. Following these actors as they cross the boundaries of nation-states, move between imperial metropolises and colonies, or establish transnational organizations and movements has proven invaluable for the research of transregional processes.

Regionalization and space-making

Whereas all studies of intercultural transfer depart from the idea that the foreign culture and one's own culture constitute each other mutually and therefore cannot exist independently from each other even though they remain distinct, culturally defined spaces are not, as the original concept might have suggested, nationally defined. The debates about translocality and *métissage* and the emphasis on the social history of intermediation have strengthened the concept of intercultural transfer in many respects. They reveal that intercultural transfers are complex interplays between the various scalar levels of territory and that they also encapsulate other, non-territorial formats of space. Intercultural transfers could occur between territories, places, and networks. The term culture does not necessarily suggest a close relationship with the one scale of territory that is the nation.

The study of intercultural transfers has thus revealed a differentiated landscape of historically changing entanglements between different kinds of places and spaces that merit more systematic investigation. Further advancements of the concept demonstrate that national cultures did not necessarily come into close contact per se, but that encounters happen locally and regionally to become eventually nationalized only afterwards – and by no means necessarily, since many transfers have not played out on that scale. Moreover, some smaller or bigger regions are much more active in appropriating foreign cultural elements than others (Espagne 2013). This, of course, can be the result of intense comparison between transfer activities in different regions or simply the effect of a biased research situation and different degrees of knowledge about such regions. But irrespective of the fact that not all regions have been subject to the same intensity of research, it seems that there are substantial regional differences in the willingness and capability of communities and regions to enter the world of intercultural transfer. These communities and regions form a network of transfer regions transgressing the borders of individual states or even of continents.

Identifying such regions exposed to strong contact with other parts of the world, which are ready to make use and profit from such contacts while establishing a long-term regional characteristic out of them, relates the research on transregional intercultural transfers to the investigation of portals of globalization (Baumann, Dietze and Maruschke 2017). Such portals are not only places of intense global flows – such as port cities, metropolises of colonial empires, special economic zones, etc. – but are also hubs of a transregional consciousness and memory. They are, accordingly, often equipped with institutions that support transregional – often colonial – knowledge production, such as museums, botanic gardens, or institutions of higher education with a special emphasis on area studies. The subsequent question for transregional studies, then, is to what extent such portals of globalization are connected to productive hinterlands and in what way do regional developments impact them. This means one must also investigate (1) how people living in such hubs developed a unique curiosity for what happened in the world and how they looked for objects that could be subjects of intercultural transfers into their own community, and (2) who profited from such cultural innovation and how far reaching was it?

Against this background of local and regional differentiation, it becomes clear that the transfer itself is a space-producing activity. It privileges some places over others, creates lines of circulation, and builds networks of brokers and intermediaries. Here, it nearly excellently connects with the multifaceted research undertaken in sociology, economics, anthropology, and history on networks (as an overview, see Holton 2008; and as an excellent example for a *longue durée* approach to networks, see Bhattacharya, Dharampal-Frick and Gommans 2007). During this time, intercultural transfer becomes methodologically highly sophisticated, going global and transregional in many different ways.

It is therefore worth investigating the geographies of cultural interaction, including the networks and institutions, media and industries, and policies and regulatory frameworks that demarcate the transregional limitations, both stretching and contracting, of intercultural transfers (Rabault-Feuerhahn 2014). In this way, intercultural transfer analysis becomes the point of departure for investigating both regionalizations and transregional interactions.

The intercultural transfer approach has not developed into a general theory applicable everywhere. On the contrary, it is rather a key for the discovery of new research constellations, open for investigation and productive appropriation. This makes the approach so compelling for the growing interest in global history, which is in need of an appropriate methodology to conceptualize interactions across borders of regions and continents as a result of global processes. The turn from transnational toward transregional processes was inspired, on the one hand, by the growing importance of post-colonial perspectives and, on the other hand, by the various

shifts emerging of the changing world order, and it has consequences for our understanding of transregional relations in a broader perspective. It becomes clear that the distinction between the West and ‘the Rest’ of the world no longer serves as a valid epistemology, and that we need to investigate regional differences from multiple perspectives. Intercultural transfer analysis, with its impetus of overcoming diffusionism and its strength in exploring intermediations and appropriations in empirical depth, can help to explore interactions across and between those hemispheres in more detail. On the one hand, this includes conceptions of imperial entanglements such as the historically grown culture of a nation-cum-empire construct, which was as much influenced by its colonial past in the former colonies as it was by the colonial past in the former metropolises (Cooper and Stoler 1997; Stoler 2016). On the other hand, researchers have started to focus more on mechanisms and infrastructures of South–South communication and encounter both in its material and its intellectual dimensions, such as Chinese–African transfers or the newly found role of Brazil in the Portuguese-speaking world.

One can clearly state that the research into intercultural transfer is entering a new phase in its development. Not only the discovery of the fundamental mechanisms of transfer but also the improvements that had been achieved since the 1990s will remain very useful in this new period. There are, however, also critical challenges that have not been addressed properly. One is the overlap between the colonial and the post-colonial past of today’s transregional interaction. This results in asymmetries that are both lived and perceived. They often bring the European past or the period of North American hegemony back into the analysis but not necessarily as the point of departure. A second challenge is the term ‘region’ itself, since it turns out that the regions we might, these days, take for granted are the product of specific historical interactions – be it the race for Africa between the European colonial powers in the late nineteenth century, the need of American troops during the Second World War to organize intelligence into manageable units, or the search of the Soviet Union for its place in this world of regions. This understanding of the constructedness and historical trajectories of regions will most probably be taken further by the current emergence of area studies in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. This respatialization of area studies will certainly produce new concepts of regions and transregional interaction, and the method of intercultural transfer might be especially helpful in this regard.

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