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Entangled Positions:

From Comparative and Transnational History to Histories of Possible Meaning

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Abstract

In this essay I present a critical reassessment of comparative and transnational history. Drawing our attention to the problem of meaning and historicity, I argue that reconsidering the theoretical underpinnings of these approaches provide us the opportunity to rethink central aspects of our vocation. The structure of the argument is threefold. First I present an empirical case study focusing on the reception of Montesquieu's *The Spirit of the Laws* in eighteenth century Denmark-Norway. Secondly, I discuss the theoretical implications of classical positions within comparative and transnational history, placing some emphasis on their inherent tensions and frictions. Applying these approaches to the empirical example, I point out a number of problems particular to each perspective. Finally, introducing a concept of what I shall call 'histories of possible meaning', I attempt to overcome some of the most pressing theoretical problems inherent in comparative and transnational history.

Prelude¹

<1>

In recent historiography, comparative and transnational history has received much attention from historians working within a broad variety of fields, stretching from social and cultural history to political history and colonial studies.² Across these fields, a number of common traits are visible, such as the much-needed critique of methodological nationalism as well as the interest in movements, interactions and exchanges taking place in between national entities.³ Consequentially, historicizing national histories has become an indispensable part of the historian's *métier*, reshaping long-established notions of time, space and meaning.⁴ Nonetheless, the actual scope

¹ An earlier version of this essay was given at the Fifth Annual Graduate Conference in European History, European University Institute, Florence, 28-30th April 2011.

² AHR Conversation: On Transnational History, in: *American Historical Review* 111 (2006), 1441-1464. For a general overview see Nils Arne Sørensen: *Den transnationale vending?*, in: *Historisk Tidsskrift* 109 (2009), 459-472. On comparative history see Jürgen Kocka / Heinz-Gerhard Haupt: *Comparison and Beyond: Traditions, Scope, and Perspectives of Comparative History*, in: Heinz-Gerhard Haupt / Jürgen Kocka (eds.): *Comparative and Transnational History: Central European Approaches and New Perspectives*, New York / Oxford 2009, 1-30.

³ See for example David Thelen: *The Nation and Beyond: Transnational Perspectives on United States History*, in: *The Journal of American History* 86 (1999), 965-975; Silke Neunsinger: *Cross-over! Om komparationer, transferanalyser, histoire croisée och den metodologiska nationalismens problema*, in: *Historisk Tidsskrift* 130 (2010), 3-25.

⁴ On space see, for example, Michael G. Müller / Cornelius Torp: *Conceptualising Transnational Spaces in History*, in: *European Review of History / Revue européenne d'histoire* 16 (2009), 609-617.

as well as the theoretical prospects of this historicization has remained in the dark. Indeed, one might argue, the theoretical apparatus with which to back up this alleged historicization alludes to no more than a number of misconceived presuppositions. In addition, it seems, the well-intended deconstruction of prevalent national-minded historiographies is lost in a theoretical fog.

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Addressing the recurrent problems of historicity and meaning, this essay offers – from the point of view of intellectual history – a critique as well as a rehabilitation of comparative and transnational history. Whereas intellectual historians, on the one hand, have been working with these perspectives for decades, making it of little interest in terms of theoretical reconsideration, a renewed interest in these perspectives also – and more importantly – provide us the opportunity to rethink central aspects of our vocation; it offers a unique chance to reflect on what it is we are doing when we reconstruct the past. The structure of the argument is threefold. Considering the reception of Montesquieu's *The Spirit of the Laws* in eighteenth century Denmark-Norway, I first draw our attention to an empirical example to which I intend to return repeatedly throughout the argumentation.⁵ Secondly, I discuss the theoretical implications of classical positions within comparative and transnational history placing some emphasis on their inherent tensions and frictions. In discussing comparative and transnational approaches separately, I point out a number of problems particular to each perspective. Finally, I make a brief sketch of a theoretical perspective that, in my view, is able to make such historicization possible.

Montesquieu and the Problem of Despotism

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Until the eighteenth century, the Aristotelian model of constitutional forms was one of the most influential theories in European political thought. According to Aristotle, it was possible to distinguish between three types of government (monarchy, aristocracy and politeia) and their respective negations (tyranny, oligarchy and democracy).⁶ This picture, however, changed dramatically in the eighteenth century, and the main force behind this was the publication of Montesquieu's *The Spirit of the Laws*.⁷ In this

⁵ The reception of Montesquieu is a well-known topic in Scandinavian historiography, and I owe a great deal to the existing literature. The reception has not, however, been subject to any theoretical reflections on past meaning. See especially: Henrik Horstbøll: *Defending Monarchism in Denmark-Norway in the Eighteenth Century*, in: Hans Blom / John Christian Laursen / Luisa Simonutti (eds.): *Monarchisms in the Age of Enlightenment: Liberty, Patriotism, and the Common Good*, Toronto / Buffalo / London 2007, 175-194; Jeppe Nevers: *Fra skældsord til slagord: Demokratibegrebet i dansk politiske historie*, Odense 2011; Jeppe Nevers: *Montesquieu og den danske enevældes legitimitet*, in: Sissel Bjerrum Fossat / Anne Magnussen / Klaus Petersen / Nils Arne Sørensen (eds): *Transnationale historier*, Odense 2009, 147-161; Ditlev Tamm: *The Danish Debate about Montesquieu: Holberg, Kofoed Ancher, Stampe, Sneedorff and Schytte*, in: Knud Haakonssen / Henrik Horstbøll (eds.): *Northern Antiquities and National Identity: Perceptions of Denmark and the North in the Eighteenth Century*, Viborg 2008, 163-180; Edvard Holm: *Om det Syn paa Kongemagt, Folk og borgerlig Frihed, der udviklede sig i den dansk-norske Stat i Midten af 18de Aarhundrede*, Copenhagen 1883.

⁶ Aristotle: *The Politics and The Constitution of Athens*, Cambridge 1996.

⁷ In terms of redescription and impact, we need to look at Machiavelli in order to find an author with a similar impact on the landscape of political theory. See Judith Shklar: *Montesquieu and the new republicanism*, in: Gisela Bock / Quentin Skinner / Maurizio Viroli (eds.): *Machiavelli and Republicanism*, Cambridge 1990, 265-281.

magnum opus, he introduced a different distinction that turned key aspects of the Aristotelian model upside down. In Montesquieu's view, the main distinctions were between republican government (which in Montesquieu's terminology could be either democratic or aristocratic), monarchical and despotic states. The defining moment in Montesquieu's theory was that he tied a specific nature as well as a characteristic principle to each. In a crucial passage, Montesquieu puts it in these words:

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"I have said that the nature of republican governments is that the people as a body, or certain families, have the sovereign power; the nature of monarchical government is that the prince has the sovereign power, but that he exercises it according to established laws; the nature of despotic government is that one alone governs according to his wills and caprices".⁸

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The characteristic principles, he argued, followed directly from the nature of government. Republican governments were thus characterized by 'virtue' though he found that it was more the case in democracies, where virtue applies to all citizens, than aristocracies, where it only applies to noble families. In monarchies virtues are replaced by 'honor', which set aside the principles of patriotism as well as the love of country and constitution. Finally, the principle of despotism was 'fear'.⁹

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To understand why this redescription of the Aristotelian categories became a theoretical problem in Denmark-Norway, we must have in mind that the Danish-Norwegian monarchy was the only contemporary state governed by a written absolutist constitution, the *Lex Regia* of 1665.¹⁰ In other words, the Danish-Norwegian monarchy faced the danger of falling into the wrong category; it risked the charge of despotism. When Montesquieu published *The Spirit of the Laws* in 1748, Denmark-Norway already had a damaged reputation in the rest of Europe, mainly thanks to the British diplomat Robert Molesworth, who, half a century earlier, had published a severely critical work entitled *An Account of Denmark as it was in 1692*.¹¹

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Thus, it seemed that *The Spirit of the Laws* could only add to the already damaged reputation of Denmark-Norway and, for these reasons, Montesquieu posed a serious challenge to the thoroughly monarchical convictions of contemporary Danish-Norwegian intellectuals. Ludvig Holberg, one of the leading intellectuals of his time, was the first to address the problem. His reply to Montesquieu – which can be found in a few scattered epistles from the late 1740s and onwards, and later in a French translation from 1753 entitled *Remarques sur quelques positions, qui se trouvent dans*

⁸ Charles Louis de Secondat Montesquieu: *The Spirit of the Laws*, A.M. Cohler / B.C. Miller / H.S. Stone (eds.), Cambridge 1989, Book 3, chapter 2, 21.

⁹ Montesquieu: *The Spirit of the Laws* (see FN 8), Book 3, chapter 4-11.

¹⁰ The *Lex Regia* is reprinted in Jens Himmelstrup / Jens Møller (eds.): *Danske Forfatningslove 1665-1853*, Copenhagen 1970.

¹¹ Robert Molesworth: *An Account of Denmark, as it was in the Year 1692*, London 1694. On the reception of Molesworth see Sebastian Olden-Jørgensen: *Robert Molesworth's 'An Account of Denmark as it was in 1692': A Political Scandal and its Literary Aftermath*, in: Knud Haakonssen / Henrik Horstbøll (eds.): *Northern Antiquities and National Identities: Perceptions of Denmark and the North in the Eighteenth Century*, Viborg 2008, 68-87.

l'Esprit des Loix – evolves around two central rhetorical moves, each redescribing a key element in Montesquieu's argumentation.¹² First, he challenges the relationship between virtue and republican government. Taking Roman history as his example, he argues that "the closer Government moved towards *Democracy*, the more its citizens lost their good *Qualities*; the more Liberty, the less Virtue. Enthusiasm for the Welfare of the Country turned into Love of oneself, Obedience to Authorities was *succeeded* by Persistence".¹³ Thus, on Holberg's account, virtue was better off in monarchies, where one would find no factions, nor any self-interest among the citizens.

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The second rhetorical strategy is somewhat more refined, and it is directed against another key element in Montesquieu's theory, the introduction of despotism as an independent category. If we look at the rhetoric in Holberg's reply to Montesquieu, he first argues that Montesquieu's distinction between "*Barbarian Despotisms*" and "other *absolute Sovereignities*" is unclear. Instead of referring to "*Despotisms*" in general, Montesquieu should solely have referred to "*African and Oriental Despotisms*" where one "sees no Spark of *Morality*" (209-210), as he terms it. Further, he relates the question of despotism not to the nature or principles of government, as Montesquieu had done, but to the question of good or bad rulers. This move is evident from the following:

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"... for *Despotism*, whether it is found in *Africa* or *Europe*, in *moral* or *immoral* Countries, cannot be *defined* by other terms than an *arbitrary* Government, where the one who Governs, following the *Examples* of the oldest *Patriarchs*, has Throat and Hand over his Subjects, so that his Will alone is the Law of the Country. ... [It is evident] that under good *Despots* the Subjects can live in Happiness, and that Virtue and *Honour* does have a place in such Governments as well as in *Democracies*, *Aristocracies* and limited *Monarchies*. My Intention is not to accuse the *Author* of *indirectly* wanting to scorn all Sovereign Government: This may never have occurred to him. ... [But] When the Rulers or the Sovereigns are good, then, one can say, all Governments are good, whether they carries the Name of *Monarchies*, *Aristocracies* or *Democracies*. And if one look for *Examples* one will find that the Subjects in certain *Monarchies* often had greater Freedom and were subjected to fewer Burdens than in many of the so called free *Republics*" (211-212).

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In presenting this twofold argumentation, Holberg is addressing the possible connections between Denmark-Norway and despotism. Whereas absolutist monarchs were mostly virtuous and honourable (and indeed, often more so than in republics), despotic rulers were determined to exercise arbitrary power. To Holberg this was the real distinction to be made and its function was to legitimize the kind absolute monarchism found in Denmark-Norway as well as to place it on the right side of the dividing line between illegitimate and legitimate forms of government.

¹² Ludvig Holberg: *Epistler* (vol. I-VIII), Copenhagen 1944-1954, epistles 514, 516, 517, 518, 519, 520. For the French translation see Ludvig Holberg: *Remarques sur quelques positions, qui se trouvent dans l'Esprit des Loix*, Copenhagen 1753.

¹³ Ludvig Holberg: *Epistler* (see FN 12), epistle 514, 202. Further references to this epistle will occur in the text.

Comparing Origins of Meaning

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If we ask ourselves what happened in Holberg's reception of *The Spirit of the Laws*, we are automatically asking questions that are central to both comparative and transnational history. In recent historiography, these terms are used in a number of conflicting ways, and with varying evaluative force. On some historians claim, comparative history is to be counted among the essential methods of the historians' craft, and, subsequently, transnational history is to be perceived as a valuable supplement to this approach.¹⁴ Other historians have, however, been rather critical of comparative history, seeking instead to formulate an alternative approach that focuses on transfers of things and ideas et cetera.¹⁵ As I see it, both comparative and transnational history can lead to valuable insights whether combined or individually, but whatever the choice, certain problems arise when applied to intellectual history. I shall consider them briefly.

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In short, comparative history deals with various "units of comparison."¹⁶ As Marc Bloch put it in his classic essay on the subject, the historian must "choose from one or several social situations, two or more phenomena which appear at first sight to offer certain analogies between them; then to trace their line of evolution, to note the likeness and differences, and as far as possible explain them", and further, "there must be a certain similarity between the facts observed – an obvious point – and a certain dissimilarity between the situations in which they have arisen".¹⁷ The uptake of this approach is to study the same phenomena, the same units of comparison, in different situations, and seek to establish a causal relationship between differences and similarities, either "separated in time and space" or "neighbouring and contemporary".¹⁸ Bloch's approach, which has been adapted by several historians in recent historiography, is centred on particular notions of identity and differences. But as Bloch states, historians have often been preoccupied with similarities. In Bloch's view, comparison is not only about similarities, it "should [also] involve especially lively interest in the perception of differences, whether original or resulting from divergent developments from the same starting-point".¹⁹ In other words, the dynamic relationship between similarities and differences brings with it a strong commitment to historicity, in the sense that "comparative history has a duty to bring out the 'originality' of the different societies".²⁰

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Holberg and Montesquieu are both writing from a specific place in a specific historical context, and a comparative analysis places emphasis on exactly this. But Montesquieu was not the cause of Holberg's thinking or the directions it took. The scope of his political thought cannot be understood by searching for causality, as Bloch would have it. Instead we should ask questions regarding reception and the creation of meaning. In

¹⁴ Heinz-Gerhard Haupt: Comparative history – a contested method, in: *Historisk Tidskrift* 127 (2007), 697-716.

¹⁵ Michel Espagne: Sur les limites du comparatisme en histoire culturelle, in: *Genèses* 17 (1994), 112-121.

¹⁶ Haupt: Comparative history (see FN 14).

¹⁷ Marc Bloch: *A Contribution towards a Comparative History of European Societies*, in: *Land and Work in Medieval Europe*, London 1967, 45.

¹⁸ Bloch: *A Contribution* (see FN 17), 46-47.

¹⁹ Bloch: *A Contribution* (see FN 17), 58.

²⁰ Bloch: *A Contribution* (see FN 17), 58.

this sense, comparative history harbours a problematic tension between historicity and causality. This is a problem in Bloch's take on comparative history.

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On the one hand, Bloch sees the "document" as "a witness" that needs to be put "under cross-examination" in order to tell us anything, in order for us to "discover the facts".²¹ The document knows something of interest to the historian; it has been close to a past phenomenon, to its origin. History only has one direction, as Bloch eloquently points out in his *Apologie pour l'histoire ou métier d'historien*.²² Surrounded by the plasma of time, history is subjected to an irreversible movement that pushes it ahead. Placed in this movement, past texts – our witnesses to the passing of time – only lay bare their meaning once we trace back the causes of their creation. On the other hand, Bloch leaves open the possibility that different results of the same phenomenon can be "almost equivalent to a difference in kind".²³ But how can something 'almost' constitute a difference? This notion of something that almost constitutes a difference reveals a problematic tension in Bloch's approach. While attempting to mediate between stable entities of meaning, or units of comparison, Bloch not only tends to conceptualize past differences within the boundaries of what essentially remains 'the same', he also lets causality delimit the 'play' of differences and similarities in the past, pulling historicity in the direction of homogeneity.

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In the case of Holberg and Montesquieu, the traditional vocabulary of comparative history seems unable to single out what is happening in Holberg's reception. Comparing the original of *The Spirit of the Laws* to Holberg's *Epistler* will, on the one hand, enable us to establish that Holberg only engaged Montesquieu on certain points, while leaving out others, thus inscribing the reception in a web of differences and similarities. Certainly such similarities and differences are important, and they serve as a crucial a moment in our understanding of the event, but perceiving the reception in terms of causality, that is, as a factor "that have led to similarities or differences, convergence or divergence" is to undermine the notion of historicity just described.²⁴ Further, the comparative approach seems to draw our attention towards a somewhat flawed notion of autonomous units in the past that leads to essentialism. The question with which we are dealing here is what happens to the comparative approach when we recognise that the units of comparison are not in themselves stable entities, that is, what happens to comparative history when we realise that the units of comparison are changing as we go along. So, if we wish to understand the reception, it seems we need to place much more emphasis on the encounter itself; we need to ask what past meaning is moved by it. As I will return to later, there is a movement in Holberg's reception of Montesquieu that goes far beyond the scope of comparison.

Histoire Croisée and the Problem of Reflectivity

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Considering the alternative, transnational or transfer history faces a similar problem. For example, as the protagonists of the *histoire croisée* approach have argued, our

²¹ Bloch: A Contribution (see FN 17), 48, 50.

²² Marc Bloch: *Forsvar for historien eller Historikernes håndværk*, Copenhagen 1973, 29.

²³ Bloch: A Contribution (see FN 17), 66.

²⁴ Quoted in Jürgen Kocka: *Comparison and Beyond*, in: *History and Theory* 42 (2003), 39-44, here: 44.

main concern should be the constant 'intercrossing' of different meanings, or, that is, what moves in between different spheres of meaning and identity. Intercrossing, in this sense, works on two levels. On one level, it refers to an 'intrinsic' intercrossing of past objects, and, on the other, to the intercrossing between past and present, that is, the reflexive engagement with the past on the part of the historian. It is, in other words, the historian that constitutes the past through the analytical categories used, which is why Michael Werner and Benedict Zimmermann conceptualize their approach as a challenge of 'reflexivity'. In this light, Holberg is not just a reception or a repetition of specific elements in Montesquieu's theory. There is no causal relationship. Rather, the creation of meaning is a two-way traffic in the sense that Holberg's interpretation also takes an active part in creating the meaning of Montesquieu's work. Thus, as Werner and Zimmermann argue in a crucial passage, meaning is not caught in an irreversible movement forward, but refers to "multiple time frames that enter into the construction of an object ... as a production situated in time and space".²⁵ *Histoire croisée* thus makes the point that meaning and historicity is linked to temporality and reflexivity.

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Werner and Zimmermann make another crucial point in suggesting that historians should pay closer attention to 'the scale of analysis'. Their main emphasis here is on the interaction between different scales, that is, local, national, regional, international or even global scales.²⁶ The question of scales has several hints towards micro history, in that it implies an analytical move from the local towards a larger scale or context such as the national or the global. In this sense, historians should not conceive the global as a universal category of analysis that is constituted in applying a large-scale analysis. Rather the global should be conceived as an empirical reality that is created in historical representations – it is a way of finding "the universal in the local".²⁷ If we, again, consider the case of Holberg's political thought, the reception of Montesquieu can be seen as the creation of a transnational level in eighteenth-century Danish political thought. In contrast, Montesquieu's own work could be considered a creation of a global horizon. Not only did *The Spirit of the Laws* generate new distinctions within European constitutions, it also drew some important distinctions between Europe and eastern or Persian tyrannies – distinctions that, as it were, became eminent in Danish political thought.²⁸

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The notions of reflexivity and inter-crossing as employed within this approach are, however, severely flawed.²⁹ First, the notion of reflexivity, which makes the historian 'involved in the object', amounts to nothing more than a soft form of hermeneutics; it is the historian's question that determines the meaning of the past. Secondly, the notion of an intrinsic inter-crossing seems somewhat problematic. On the one hand, the notion

²⁵ Michael Werner / Bénédicte Zimmermann: Beyond Comparison: *Histoire Croisée* and the Challenge of Reflexivity, in: *History and Theory*, 45 (2006), 30-50, here: 45.

²⁶ Werner/Zimmermann: Beyond Comparison (FN 25), here: 34.

²⁷ Quoted in Bartolomé Yun Casalilla: 'Localism', *Global History, and Transnational History: A Reflection from the Historian of Early Modern Europe*, in: *Historisk Tidskrift* 127 (2007), 659-678, here: 669.

²⁸ Montesquieu: *The Spirit of the Laws* (see FN 8), Book 3, chapter 9-10.

²⁹ Thus I cannot follow the proposals put forth in Jani Marjanen: *Undermining Methodological Nationalism: Histoire croisée of Concepts as Transnational History*, in: Mathias Albert / Gesa Bluhm / Jan Helmig / Andreas Leutzsch / Jochen Walter (eds.): *Transnational Political Spaces: Agents – Structures – Encounters*, Frankfurt a. M. / New York 2009, 239-263.

is a clear attempt at rehabilitating the past as a partner in a hermeneutical dialogue. The past can answer back; it is not just a playground for the imaginative (or postmodern) historian. On the other hand, the notion of intrinsic inter-crossing is also a clear statement on the ontological status of the past: There *is* such a thing as an intrinsic inter-crossing in the past, an inter-crossing that resists the reflexive involvement of the historian in constituting past meaning. This, it seems, is a problematic disposition in the fabric of *histoire croisée*. How can there be any 'intrinsic' meaning in a past reality that is 'constituted' by the historian?

Histories of Possible Meaning

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To get beyond these problems, I propose we direct our attention toward what I shall call 'histories of possible meaning'.³⁰ Talking about histories of possible meaning in the way I am proposing here is to recognise that past texts cannot be reduced to stable entities; it is to recognise that the play of meaning is always pointing in several directions while simultaneously embedding a text in a variety of entangled positions. This approach involves rethinking the nature of a number of theoretical notions employed by historians, that is, notions like origin, context, and, of course, past meaning. As far as we are interested in the meaning of past texts, we need to rethink the relation between meaning and origin. To put it in a Foucaultian manner: "What is found at the historical beginning of things is not the inviolable identity of their origin; it is the dissension of other things. It is disparity".³¹ The search for origins – be it a motive, an authorial intention, an event, a structural process or a mode of thought – should, in other words, be replaced by genealogy.

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When we think of past meaning in relation to comparative and transnational history, our point of departure should not be a comparison of the original meaning of *The Spirit of the Laws* and the creolized version that unfolds in Holberg's reception. The point of the Foucaultian genealogy is exactly to say that, even at the origin, past meaning is entangled; even at the moment of creation it points to other meanings, drawing on their potential in establishing its familiarity, its 'family resemblance'.³² Past meaning is – if we think of it along the lines of genealogy and family resemblance – caught up in an entangled web of representations and meanings that cannot be fixed or stabilized at any particular moment in time. Thus, the focus has shifted from origin and causality to the 'contingency' and 'historicity' of the creation of meaning, and this raises a number of questions, crucial to what I call histories of possible meaning: First, how is past meaning created? Secondly, what possible genealogies of meaning existed at a given moment in history? And finally, how do these genealogies of meaning change?

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What is left after rejecting the notion of origin is a concern for contingent repetitions of pre-existing possibilities. This tangled origin of meaning poses a challenge to comparative as well as transnational history. For example, if we compare the political

³⁰ I have presented a similar argument in Brian Kjær Olesen: Mod en genealogi af mulige historier: tre historiografiske ansatser, in: Synsvinkler – tidsskrift for nordisk litteratur og sprog 43 (2011), 87-116.

³¹ Michel Foucault: The Foucault Reader: An Introduction to Foucault's Thought, London 1984, 79.

³² I borrow this notion from Ludwig Wittgenstein: Filosofiske undersøgelser, Copenhagen 2001, 66-67.

thought of Holberg to that of Montesquieu we are not working with a pre-given meaning that flows from specific language structures present in *The Spirit of the Laws*; there are no intrinsic intercrossings, no intrinsic connections between the meaning of Holberg's text and Montesquieu's original – despite the fact that the text is explicitly a rejection of *The Spirit of the Laws*. What we are interested in is the construction of meanings as a particular meaning; we are interested in exploring one 'possible' genealogy or history of meaning. This means looking at the relations between speech acts and pre-existing language structures, between 'parole' and 'langue'. Within the field of intellectual history, this kind of contextualism is usually associated with the Cambridge School, and in particular with the approaches developed by Quentin Skinner and John Pocock.³³ It is evident that *The Spirit of the Laws* was part of the 'langue' that surrounded Holberg's 'parole', but he could have chosen other directions or ignored it altogether. Approaching the past in this way, is to place emphasis on the contingency of past political thought, a methodological contention that seems entirely indispensable as far as we wish to understand the relations of a specific piece of writing to its surroundings. Thus, the kind of history in which we are interested is one that is formed in repetitive and innovative speech acts. In Pocock's words "there is a history formed by the interactions of *parole* and *langue*".³⁴

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If we, nonetheless, wish to understand the full scope of the relationship between innovative and repetitive speech acts and possible genealogies of meaning, or 'parole' and 'langue' in the Pocockian sense, we need to understand not only past contingency, but also historicity. That Holberg wrote against Montesquieu might have been a contingent choice but it was, nevertheless, not a random one. First of all, understanding historicity involves an understanding of the situated character of Holberg's text, that is, that certain problems would appear problematic at given moments in history. On this point I am closely following the contextualist and historicist ambitions embedded in the Skinnerian approach: "For I take it that political life itself sets the main problems for the political theorist, causing a certain range of issues to appear problematic, and a corresponding range of questions to become the leading subject of the debate".³⁵ The problem of despotism, which moved a number of Danish intellectuals to act in the aftermath of Montesquieu's publication of *The Spirit of the Laws*, is to be seen in exactly this light; *The Spirit of the Laws* had gained 'momentum', it had successfully refigured the political reality of the eighteenth century, and the potential association with the Danish-Norwegian monarchy could not be left unanswered.³⁶

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Holberg could have stayed within the theoretical grid of natural rights and Aristotelianism, as he did in his early works on natural jurisprudence,³⁷ but he did not: Montesquieu had posed a potential challenge to the Danish-Norwegian monarchy that

³³ Quentin Skinner: *Visions of Politics*, Cambridge 2002; John Pocock: *Political Thought and History: Essays on Theory and Method*, Cambridge 2009.

³⁴ Pocock: *Political Thought and History* (see FN 33), 88.

³⁵ Quentin Skinner: *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, Cambridge 1978, XI.

³⁶ On this notion of 'momentum' see Kari Palonen: *Political Times and the Temporalisation of Concepts: A New Agenda for Conceptual History*, in: Lars-Folke Landgrén / Pirkko Hautamäki (eds.): *People, Citizen, Nation*, Helsinki 2005, 50-66.

³⁷ See Ludvig Holberg: *Introduktion til Naturens of Folke-Rettens Kundskab*, in *Værker i tolv Bind*, 12 vols, Copenhagen 1969, vol I.

needed a response. Holberg's engagement with Montesquieu is illuminating a specific context, a certain range of problems, within which his epistles become meaningful. This history of possible meaning only points towards *one* such context, and in this sense, the kind of approach I am outlining here goes far beyond the essentialism of such notions as 'units of comparison' and 'intrinsic intercrossing'. In understanding the full scope of the creation of past meaning, we need to think of a specific text in relation to multiple contexts, each of which elucidating a different meaning.³⁸ Thus, both the moment in which Holberg was writing and the momentum gained by *The Spirit of the Laws* points toward a specific sense of historicity, and combined with the idea of multiple contexts this shows how repetition moves in between various genealogies of possible meaning.

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If we consider the example from a social perspective, it becomes clear that Holberg's encounter with Montesquieu serves a purpose. Shortly after its publication in 1748, *The Spirit of the Laws* had gained a widespread reputation; it was nothing short of the best work in political theory ever to have been published. In this context, Holberg's reply is an attempt at positioning himself as an important intellectual who is capable of engaging with even the most renowned figures of the Republic of Letters. In his early works, he openly acknowledged his intellectual debt to Grotius, Pufendorf and Thomasius, in the latter he rather selectively engaged with the arguments of the most famous European writers. Montesquieu was one example; his engagement with thinkers like Bayle, Leibniz or La Mettrie would provide similar examples. The reply also has a cultural dimension. In addition to his social self-fashioning, Holberg was performing a cultural act, using translation as the media of political theorizing.³⁹ Considering translation as cultural communication it becomes clear that Holberg did not intend to represent the whole argument of *The Spirit of the Laws*, nor the original intentions of Montesquieu. Instead, something else was at stake; something much more local, something much more sensitive to the specific context in which Holberg wrote.

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Using Montesquieu as his 'pretext', Holberg was able to make an ideological defence of monarchism that subverted the charges of despotism and placed the Danish-Norwegian monarchy among the legal or egalitarian monarchies in Europe. But in this particular case, the pretext also exerted a power of its own. As *The Spirit of the Laws* entered Holberg's text it created a tension that put it into 'play', it moved his text and let it slide back into the Aristotelian model.⁴⁰ By relating the question of the best form of government, not to the nature and principles of governments, but to the good or bad characters of the person or persons holding sovereign power, Holberg insists that what he calls "*Barbarian Despotisms*" is only to be considered a perverted form of

³⁸ This idea of multiple contexts is a key assumption in Pocock's inspiring work on Edward Gibbon. See John Pocock: *Barbarism and Religion*, Cambridge 1999-2005, vol. IV, here: 340-341.

³⁹ On theories of translation in early modern Europe see László Kontler: *Translation and Comparison: Early-Modern and Current Perspectives*, in: *Contributions to the History of Concepts* 3 (2007), 71-102, here: 97-99; Fania Oz-Salzberger: *The Enlightenment in Translation: Regional and European Aspects*, in: *European Review of History – Revue européenne d'Histoire* 13 (2006), 385-409.

⁴⁰ On the notion of play see Jacques Derrida: *Writing and Difference*, London/New York 1978, here: 365-66.

monarchism. At this point, there can no longer be a clear demarcation; only tensions and frictions are in play. The slide toward Aristotelianism is at odds with the distinctions made by Montesquieu; distinctions that Holberg to some extent repeats, but in a redescribed form. This creates a certain friction in his text that makes it protean and flexible; the tension makes it possible to navigate between several contemporary political theories without being restricted to one alone. But something else is added to this. From Holberg's perspective, it was of high importance to rescue the notion of absolute monarchy from the realms of despotism and he did this by giving it a special Nordic character: Holberg was interested in a form of absolute monarchy that was both egalitarian and patriotic as well as virtuous, honourable and sensitive to liberty. In this sense, the play of meaning points to the many layers of Holberg's rhetorical redescription of Montesquieu's argumentation; it reveals its contingency as well as its historicity.

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Following this, what I call histories of possible meaning are also ascribed a temporal structure that can serve as an indicator of historical change. In the words of Reinhart Koselleck: "Repetition constitutes the *longue durée* of language. Semantics can be defined as the possibility of repetition".⁴¹ Koselleck's notion of historical time exceeds the notion of temporality put forth by Bloch, that is, time as the natural force that pushes history forward. Repetition works in different temporal modes or rhythms that are linked to human experiences and expectations.⁴² At the moment of repetition historicity reveals itself; it reveals a past, a present and a future by creating and recreating a specific family resemblance. Thus historical change is found in the relationship between similarities and differences, but not in what stays 'the same' or only 'almost' amounts to a difference: a history of possible meaning involves fluid notions of time and meaning, pointing only at contingent possibilities at specific points in history.

Epilogue

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I have tried to develop two lines of argument. On the one hand, I have insisted that comparative and transnational history strengthen the practice of intellectual history by making the intellectual historian more conscious about the perspectives and choices that guide his *métier*. On the other, I have also stressed that the theoretical underpinnings of comparative and transnational history are somewhat unsatisfactory. These approaches could, in other words, gain a great deal from intellectual history, not least from the theoretical debates on similar topics taking place within this field. As the example of Holberg's reply to Montesquieu shows, a simple comparison or a study of reception is not enough if we wish to understand it historically. There is much more in 'play'. First of all, an historical understanding involves paying much more attention to the contingent possibilities that surrounded the response: Holberg could have done all sorts of other things, but he chose to do exactly this. Secondly, an historical

⁴¹ Reinhart Koselleck: Some Reflections on the Temporal Structure of Conceptual Change, in: Willem Melching / Wyger Velema (eds.): Main Trends in Cultural History. Ten Essays, Amsterdam 1994, 7-17, here: 12.

⁴² Reinhart Koselleck: The Practice of History: Timing History, Spacing Concepts, Stanford 2002, chapter 6-7; Reinhart Koselleck: Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time, New York 2004, chapter 7.

understanding of Holberg's political thought needs to be much more sensitive to historicity.

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My final remarks will be from the view of the present addressing the problem of historical representation. I would like to stress that I have not been describing a casual relation, *The Spirit of the Laws* causing Holberg's reaction, nor have I described any intrinsic connections existing in the past. What I have been doing is reconstructing a 'possible history' of entangled positions; a history that only lays claim to a kind of "being-as" the past.⁴³ This 'being-as' is created in a hermeneutical dialogue that has a history of its own. Not only is past meaning split by a range of possible genealogies in the past; the historian also mingles with it, constructing and *re*-constructing it every time the past is represented. The hermeneutical dialogue sketched in historical representations is, in other words, part of a specific '*Wirkungsgeschichte*' that also plays the game of contingency and historicity.⁴⁴ In consequence, this points to the constitutive role played by the historian. There is no intrinsic intercrossing between Montesquieu and Holberg; there is no illusion of a double, only a reading of possible meaning.

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⁴³ Paul Ricoeur: *Time and Narrative*, Chicago / London 1984-1988, vol. 3, 155.

⁴⁴ Hans-Georg Gadamer: *Sandhed og metode: Grundtræk af en filosofisk hermeneutik*, Aarhus 2004.