BOOK REVIEW


Comparativ, a journal for world history and comparative social research produced by the Centre for Area Studies at Leipzig University, is approaching its thirtieth year of publication. A glance at the editorial and advisory boards reveals some eminent names including Michael Mann, Konrad Jarasch, Michael Geyer, amongst others.

The issue under review continues its tradition of giving strong focus to African issues, in this case with a set of five articles (all in English) exploring the “challenge” of working “across the borders of commonly accepted ‘regions’ and the academic borders authoritatively dealing with them” (11). The editor, Ulf Engel, introduces the collection with a defence of the “transregional” approach, explicated in the following pages with studies of transregional conflicts in the Great Lakes region (N. B. Museka), the Lake Chad Basin (K. P. W. Döring), the Gulf of Guinea (J. Herpolshheimer) and the Horn of Africa (D. Yohannes and F. Gebresenbet).

Engel and the other authors share the perspective that the “nature of violent conflict as well as related African and external interventions on the continent” have changed since the Cold War ended (8). Their analyses centre on issues of security, though extend into considerations of development, governance and political theory. Engel reminds us that “transregional, rather than transnational, entanglements” are not new, but the term and its connotations have “got lost over the past decades” (22). He makes the case that the concept has both ontological and epistemological advantages. Thus, we might refer both to formal regions and established regional bodies, as well as to regions made up not of states but of shared imaginations; and we might use the concept to penetrate the vagueness of the overarching “global”. Then, epistemologically speaking, we might question the Eurocentrism that gives us world regions established “long ago”; and that might assist our understanding of the social processes involved in “making things transregional” (22–23). The
test of such propositions comes in the articles following, and all are of significant interest.

By no means do they suggest that “transregionalism” is an “answer” to Africa’s problems. Rather, it is an analytical approach that gives space for dissecting and explaining the “entanglements” of the contemporary scene. The International Conference of the Great Lakes Region and the UN Special Envoy for the region, for example, “are following contending agendas” (47). In the Chad Basin, a regional context is shaped by the Lake Chad Basin Commission, and a transregional context by the two engaged Economic Communities (of the West African and Central African States), but “neither of these two framings is a given”; the regions are “not pregiven but instead social artefacts that are ... made by actors over time” (50, 67). As the author of this contribution (Döring) states in the conclusion, the “article set out to caution against a naturalization of spatial imaginations of different regions” (66). In explaining attempts to support maritime security in the Gulf of Guinea, the Yaounde Process—stemming from the Summit of 2013—is seen as a “process of re-spatialization around transregional conflicts” in which member states and external actors “(re-)construct—format and order—regional space(s) at sea” (89). The study of relations between the Horn and the states of the Gulf is especially interesting as a test of the transregional argument, as it involves regions in some senses near, in others remote, so that

security situations in the Gulf often bring the ... Horn ... into the mix. This is unique to the Horn. From the continent, it is only the Horn and North African states that are exposed to such permanent external non-African actor interests. (107)

This interesting article (Yohannes and Gebresenbet) draws on scholars from the ‘Copenhagen School’ of international security, namely Barry Buzan and Ole Waever.

These are detailed studies with strong empirical bases. They can stand individually as studies of conflict and attempted resolution, but they do also give support to the more general propositions advanced in the set. Overall, the collection gives a wide-ranging test of the transregional concept. It contains some impressive scholarship well presented in the journal’s compact format. Applications beyond the continent will test its usefulness further, and the ongoing conflicts in Syria and Iraq would no doubt be candidates for such study.

The issue includes a complement of book reviews (some in German) around issues of comparative politics broadly defined, and the index
of the contents of the journal for the year 2018. Here, one can peruse, for example, Matthias Middell’s account, in English, of Roland Wenzlhuemer’s *Globalgeschichte schreiben* (Writing Global History), or Sven Trakulhun’s, in German, of Jürgen Osterhammel’s *Unfabling the East: The Enlightenment’s Encounter with Asia*. This is a wide-ranging and serious review section.

In summary, *Comparativ* is an informative scholarly journal that deserves to be read widely.

Geoffrey Hawker and Steve Wood
Macquarie University