Comparative History: Comparative Colonialisms

Graduate students interested in exploring comparative historical approaches have the option of mastering literature in one of four sub-fields: "Historiography," "Comparative Ethnicity and Nationalism," "Comparative Gender," and "Comparative Colonialisms." Each of these fields allows graduate students to situate their own focused research in broadly conceived historiographies.

Comparative Colonialisms

This field approaches the comparative study of colonialisms through debates about the past by turning to the spatial and temporal constructions of modernity and what is sometimes called postmodernity. One manner in which this can happen is to draw cultural critics and historians of Europe, and the U.S., but also Latin America and Africa into comparative historical conversations about non-western studies. Continuing the dialogues with the social sciences that comparative studies have always entailed, this field seeks to integrate literary, historiographical, postcolonial, and psychoanalytic theories into these discussions by questioning the development of nations and identities, and the disciplinary constructions of modernity, ethnicity, gender, and culture.

For the purposes of this area of study, we will avoid positing a past time of tradition that has been overcome by modernity. "Tradition" and "modernity" both come into focus at the same time, and scholars can only recognize tradition in the light of modernity. What we must call "culture," for lack of a better term, cannot be separated from the colonial moment and posited as an unchanging part of non-European civilization waiting for Europeans to uncover, interpret, document, or eventually reconstruct it. What social scientists call "tradition" developed within an atmosphere in which 19th century discourses of progress and science were percolating, both contributing and drawing from European, African, and Asian intellectual exchanges. This course will strive towards a re-envisioning of European histories that show the influence of Asian, African, and New World knowledges on the constitution of European mentalities.

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