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ON ASYMMETRICAL DEPENDENCY



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Table of Contents

I. Introduction	1
I.1 Outline	1
I.2. Key Assumptions of the BCDSS and the Current State of Research.....	2
I.2.1 Goals and Hypotheses.....	2
I.2.2 Studying Asymmetrical Dependencies – Current Perspectives from Slavery Studies and Dependency Research.....	3
I.2.3 Key Terms, Concepts, and Methodology	6
II. Theoretical and Methodological Reflections on Studying Asymmetrical Dependency	7
II.1. Practice-Oriented Approaches to Social Relations of Asymmetrical Dependency	7
II.1.1 Sayings, Doings, and Interagency	8
II.1.2 Thinking Asymmetrical Dependency Beyond Human Actors	12
II.1.3 Asymmetrical Dependency and Social Order – Contexts and Constellations	14
II.2 Comparison and Asymmetrical Dependency – Methodological Considerations.....	16
II.2.1 Provincializing Comparison: Critique and Historicization	17
II.2.2 Modelling Comparison – Perspectives from the Study of Religion	21
II.2.3 Comparison and Dependency Studies	23
III. Conclusion	27
Bibliography	29

I. Introduction*

I.1 Outline

In this paper, we discuss some basic theoretical assumptions related to the emerging field of dependency studies. Our aim in doing so is to provide tools towards analyzing key dynamics of how social relations of asymmetrical dependency are formed across time and space. We want to develop an approach grounded in social and cultural theory which can help us define in our empirical work the way/s in which elements of the world relate to each other to create, maintain, or subvert such dependencies. We do not seek to provide a comprehensive and empirically saturated account, as we believe that at this stage of the theoretical debate a strict proposal to use one particular theoretical approach would not serve the purpose of helping to connect the variegated research projects of the Bonn Center for Dependency and Slavery Studies (BCDSS). Nevertheless, our reflections might help researchers to position their individual projects within existing theoretical frameworks and to further develop a theoretical understanding of asymmetrical dependency.

Since not only the members of the BCDSS but also the authors of this paper come from very different academic disciplines such as Theology, Historical Islamic Studies, Social and Cultural Anthropology, as well as Cultural and Religious Studies, we had to grapple with a particular challenge, namely to define theoretical categories that are applicable for both historical research and for projects dealing with contemporary manifestations of asymmetrical dependency. While archaeologists rely primarily on material and human remains, and historians mainly use documents, social-science oriented studies also work with ethnographic methods, e.g. interviews, inquiries, and participant observation. Any theoretical framework developed should be suitable for both historical and archeological projects (which currently form the majority of BCDSS undertakings) and for researchers who analyze forms of contemporary asymmetrical dependency (as represented e.g. by the Contemporary Asymmetrical Dependency working group). For this reason, we prefer theoretical approaches which focus on “practices” and consider not only relations between people, but also those between people and other entities – such as material artifacts, other organisms, and gods and spirits – as important to the understanding of asymmetrical dependency.

At the same time, we have no intention to engage in detail with the existing theoretical debates over different approaches to practice theory (see Schatzki, Knorr-Cetina, and von Savigny 2001; Elias et al. 2014; Schäfer 2016) or the various challenges connected to a “flat ontology” (Schatzki 2016, 28–42). Rather, the aim of this paper is to use specific aspects of these approaches in order to explore which elements are crucial for the formation of social relations of asymmetrical dependency, and how these elements, as well as their inter/relations, are to be understood.

In the remainder of this first part (I) some main insights and key hypotheses which have been brought forward during the formation of the BCDSS will be outlined and put into the context

* This paper was written by an interdisciplinary group of scholars from very different backgrounds and with initially quite different ideas about which of the many points raised by the cluster application (BCDSS 2021a) should be covered first and in which way. We not only benefited from each other’s individual contributions and our joint discussions, but also immensely from the feedback and input of several critical readers. We would like to offer our thanks to many of the members of the BCDSS, in particular Sinah Kloß, Christian De Vito, Claudia Jarzebowski, and Pia Wiegink.

of existing research on related phenomena. The second part reflects more closely on theoretical approaches, epistemic assumptions, and methodological challenges in studying asymmetrical dependency (II). In the first section (II.1) we will discuss the concepts like agency, structure, and social order. We will argue for a practice-oriented understanding of asymmetrical dependency and consider a variety of actors and elements as involved in such local and translocal social relations. The second section (II.2) deals with the challenge of comparison in dependency studies. We will address critiques of the comparative endeavor in general, present recent attempts to model comparison in the study of religion as an example, and discuss these rather abstract considerations within the specific context of studying asymmetrical dependency. In part III we will give a summary of our main insights and point towards avenues for future research.

I.2. Key Assumptions of the BCDSS and the Current State of Research

I.2.1 Goals and Hypotheses

The BCDSS set out with the (ambitious) goal to overcome the traditional European “binary opposition of ‘slavery versus freedom’” still dominating slavery studies, and proposed to replace it with the alternative and new key concept of asymmetrical dependency, which encompasses all “diverse forms that human bondage and coercion have taken over time” (BCDSS, n.d.-a).

This research goal is based on two bold hypotheses about human social orders: the first states that “strong institutions of asymmetrical dependency” occur “in all human societies”, past and present (BCDSS 2021a, 3). Social relations of asymmetrical dependency can be found cross-culturally as well as trans-historically and should be regarded as an important aspect of “human experience” (Miller 2012, 2; see BCDSS 2021a, 3) in most local and cultural contexts. The second hypothesis claims that these dependency structures are – in one way or another – “formative” for the societies they occur in (BCDSS 2021a, 3). In that sense, asymmetrical dependencies are understood as a *sine qua non* for the stability, durability, and continuity of human social orders (or central aspects of them). The latter therefore have to be analyzed as at least ‘regular’ features, not as outliers or deviations from established societal norms. In this sense, the project of the BCDSS is about “the study of *homo hierarchicus*, who establishes, enforces and accepts strong asymmetries” (BCDSS 2021a, 3).

By way of introducing the terms “asymmetry” and “dependency” as key terms for the study of “all forms of societal, group-related, and individual hierarchization and oppression” (BCDSS, n.d.-b), the BCDSS explores the idea of a “continuum of dependency” (Eltis and Engerman 2011, 3). Within this continuum, actors may be subjected to more or less dependency and, accordingly, may possess more or less agency. However, whereas some form of dependency affects every single human being, *asymmetrical*, i.e. strong and enduring, forms of dependency do not. In order to distinguish *asymmetrical* dependencies from other types of dependency, the BCDSS therefore proposes the following two main characteristics of asymmetrical dependency:

- 1) Asymmetrical dependency is “based on the ability of one actor to control the actions and the access to resources of another” (BCDSS, n.d.-a; see Coleman 1990).

2) Asymmetrical dependency is usually “supported by an institutional background” in such a way as to ensure “that the dependent actor normally cannot change their situation by either going away (‘exit’) or by articulating protest (‘voice’)” (BCDSS, n.d.-a; see. Hirschmann 1970).

I.2.2 Studying Asymmetrical Dependencies – Current Perspectives from Slavery Studies and Dependency Research

While sociological and psychological theories are conscious of the inevitability of dependency within human relations, so far no comprehensive theories of the institutions of (asymmetrical) dependency have been formed and, in contrast to ‘autonomy’, the concept of ‘dependency’ has never featured as a core term in sociology (BCDSS, n.d.-a). Rather, the vast majority of existing research on asymmetrical dependency relations can be found in slavery studies. Unlike dependency, slavery has been studied widely. Most contributions are studies by historians, historically oriented sociologists, and legal scholars. The majority of empirical studies concentrates on two classical examples of slavery or slavery-like relations. The first are trans-Atlantic forms of slavery, the second are forms of slavery in ancient Mediterranean societies, especially in Ancient Greece and Ancient Rome. In this context, abolition studies has developed into its own institutionalized field (Sinha 2018). The history of Atlantic slavery is closely entangled with the creation of the modern West. Thus, “slavery” and “freedom” have become “ideologically charged terms” (BCDSS, n.d.-a) that tell us “more about Europe’s self-conceptualisation [...] than about the complex historical phenomenon of asymmetrical dependencies itself” (BCDSS 2021a, 2).

Other world regions and periods have been far less well explored. There are only few works on slavery and other forms of strong asymmetrical dependencies with a focus on non-European/non-monotheistic regions. For example, as far as the African continent is concerned, slaveries not operated by Europeans in parts other than Western Africa are severely understudied (Meillassoux 1986). Some research focuses on slavery in Islamic polities between Arabian regions, Northeast Africa, and Western Africa especially from a legal perspective (Srivastava 2004; Franz 2018). Studies on slavery in Asia are few and tend to have a certain bias towards Southeast Asia and/or the Indian Ocean (Reid 1983; Jones 2007; Chevaleyre 2020). For the Indian Ocean region there are works emphasizing trans-regional connectedness (Van Rossum et al. 2020; Chakraborty and Van Rossum 2020; Nicolaas, van Rossum, and Bosma 2020). Furthermore, there are several studies on e.g. serfdom in particular regions of Europe or Eurasia (Hoch 1986; Cerman 2014; Stanziani 2015).

Some more recent studies revisit classical forms of slavery from a new theoretical perspective, e.g. informed by insights from migration studies, post-colonialist approaches, or cultural studies (Hanß and Schiel 2000; Rauhut and Boatcă 2019; Rutherford 2020; Thiaw and Mack 2020). Others apply a historical anthropological approach to the topic of slavery by combining archival and field research (Tappe and Lindner 2016). Archaeological research on prehistoric forms of slavery is a small emerging field (Marshall 2015). The same can be said about research on the role of material culture for slavery and slave identity in particular (Leone 2020). At the BCDSS, projects are also underway that deal with legal history, slavery, and labor in the Lusophone South Atlantic (Dias Paes 2020a; 2020b).

Contemporary ways of looking at past slaveries require further investigation. There are only a small number of studies on commemoration, slavery museums, public displays of slavery, and on “consuming” slavery in tourism, e.g. in festivals or cultural markets from a cultural studies or postcolonial perspective (Knauer 2011). Equally rare are studies on current anti-slavery-movements (Murphy 2019). Some existing work links historical trajectories with contemporary issues, such as the role of slavery in the “racialization of the modern world” (Pierre 2020).

Many studies on contemporary slavery focus on practice or policy and human rights. These “applied” studies are informative for historians, but often come with some problems. Firstly, many of these works use a very broad definition of slavery and indicate this by using the term in quotation marks. Secondly, they often foreground practical applications and are therefore less concerned with generating new analytical or theoretical insights. Nevertheless, the juridical aspects of these applied studies can be revealing for historical studies, since they propose practical (if broad) working definitions of slavery oriented towards contemporary policy issues in order to develop rights-based measures.

While there are of course some comprehensive if largely additive overviews, such as encyclopedias or handbooks on slavery (e.g. *The Cambridge World History of Slavery* [Bradley et al. 2011–7]; Zeuske 2021), only a few contributions have attempted a more comparative and theoretical approach informed by sociology or anthropology (see most famously Finley 1980; Patterson 1982; Meillassoux 1986; Testart 2002; Miers 2008; Davis 2008). Of the available more general or systematic historical overviews, only a handful are truly topically organized or attempt to treat the subject with a typological and/or a global scope (Patterson 1982; Quirk 2008; Flaig 2009; Miller 2012; Reid 2013; Zeuske 2021). Explicit attempts at theory-building in the field are few and far between (Rotman 2018). At the BCDSS, De Vito (n.d.) and Stichweh (2020a) have presented elements of a general theory of asymmetrical dependency.

However, some general topics of interest for the study of asymmetrical dependency emerged from these works in slavery studies, e.g. (a) the role of inequality and patron-client-relations resp. patronage (Scott 1972), (b) the relevance of kin relations (Meillassoux 1983; Kopytoff 1982), and (c) the notion of “social death” (Králová 2015, Patterson 2017). What more recent works have generally emphasized is (a) social order, (b) the relevance of shared emic conceptions of power, inequality, and labor, and (c) the importance of actor’s views, experiences, and emotions.

In addition, several of the more recent contributions to slavery studies have highlighted the difficulties in defining the phenomenon of slavery, pointing to the range of its different forms, contexts, and the impossibility of describing them e.g. only in legal terms and with a focus on the binary between “free” and “enslaved” (see e.g. Pelteret 1995; Rio 2017; Rotman 2009). So in a way the call for a new taxonomy of social relations of asymmetrical dependency has its roots in the ongoing conceptual challenges of slavery studies (Miers 2003; Quirk 2011; Zeuske 2013; Mende 2019).

Outside of the distinct field of slavery studies there are a number of studies that are highly relevant for the development of a field of dependency studies, because they are concerned with relations and structures of asymmetrical dependency but do not treat them in these terms. Thomas Piketty’s *Capital and Ideology* (2020), for example, discusses colonialism and

specifically slavery at length without referring to dependency once. Instead, he frames his argument in terms of the notion of inequality. Other historical studies important for an understanding of asymmetrical dependency are works on specific forms and dynamics of labor in history or in contemporary societies (Lucassen 2008). Here we find studies on unfree labor, human bondage, and coercion, especially from a social historical, colonial historical, or postcolonial perspective (e.g. Van der Linden 2008; Van der Linden and García 2016). Building on the insight that “gender is a primary way of signifying relationships of power” (Scott 1988: 167), some more recent studies are informed by gender studies and intersectionality approaches (Schmieder 2007; 2013; 2018; Campbell and Elbourne 2014; Sjöholm 2017, 455–505; Østhus 2017; 2018). An almost entirely unstudied topic are female slave-holders (except e.g. Zazek 2021) and the general history of female oppressors. Labor is also a key theme in studies on contemporary forms of asymmetrical dependency. These mostly look at unfree labor conditions in poor countries, poor regions, and marginalized areas within the global system of unequal exchange, such as in agricultural work, fishery (Marschke and Vandergeest 2016), and human trafficking or sex work (Archer 2013; Lainez 2018).

Research on dependency which does employ the term is scattered across different disciplines: Forms of dependency between humans or within societies are especially studied by historical sociologists, in development studies, and in globalization research. Mutual dependency and the relatedness of dependency and power are established topics in sociology and the psychology of small groups (see e.g. Emerson 1962; Michaels and Wiggins 1976; Molm 1985). One core macro-theoretical endeavor is Dependency Theory (*dependencia*, Amin 1976; Cardoso and Faletto 1979) and its offshoots, such as World-Systems Theory (Wallerstein 1980; Wallerstein 2004). These macro-theories have been used in micro-research on dependency relations within the economy of health in poor countries (Morgan 1987).

Within critical development studies some researchers have studied dependency in contemporary polities informed by postcolonial insights (Ferguson 2013). Forms of severe dependency in indigenous peoples in pre-colonial and colonial times are a neglected topic (e.g. Ruyle 1973; Wengrow and Graeber 2018). A more recent development is the analysis of precarious employment conditions within research institutions which employs dependency as a paradigm (Peacock 2016 on the Max Planck Institutes).

In summary, the study of asymmetrical dependency as a coherent field does not yet exist (see also De Vito n.d.). To establish it, there is a need for (a) theoretical work which identifies general patterns, dynamics, and typical trajectories of asymmetrical dependency, (b) theory-oriented empirical studies of the cultural and societal framework that enables these dependencies, (c) explicitly comparative empirical studies, and (d) systematic studies on the connection of certain markers of asymmetrical dependency to more general phenomena like power and inequality. Multiple theoretical avenues are being explored at the BCDSS in regard to systematic theory development. Two seem especially fruitful at present. The first one uses sociological theory to develop a general notion of dependency in human social relations. This perspective is linked to macro-sociological theorizing. A case in point is Rudolf Stichweh’s work, which is informed by sociological systems theory and the concept of “world society” (Stichweh 2020a). The second theoretical approach builds on insights from cultural studies and micro-history to define dependency studies (e.g. De Vito 2020; De Vito n.d.). While not aligning ourselves with all its theoretical foundations, it is this second approach that we most closely adhere to in this paper.

I.2.3 Key Terms, Concepts, and Methodology

In view of this state of research, the BCDSS set itself the task of examining “the diverse forms that human bondage and coercion have taken over time” (BCDSS, n.d.-b). A large number of case studies, juxtaposed in an analytical framework which is continuously being refined will, hopefully, lead to a “new taxonomy of asymmetrical dependency” (BCDSS, n.d.-b). A particular strategic focus of the Center lies on pre-modern and non-European societies, which addresses some of the major research gaps identified above. In sum, this research aims to reinvigorate the international debate on slavery and other forms of asymmetrical dependency, and provide new insights for our understanding of past and present-day questions of social inequality and economic exploitation.

Social Order and Agency

As a fundamental premise for its research on asymmetrical dependency, the BCDSS has adopted two key concepts of social history, ‘social order’ and ‘agency’, in an attempt to combine structuralist and praxeological approaches for a new understanding of social history.

The BCDSS understands social order as any “system of institutions, social relations, value orientations and practices, and as the structuring and structured processes of social reality” (BCDSS 2021a, 7). This also includes the emic perspective of actors by way of describing their “worldview” (see Berger and Luckmann 1966). Finally, social order should not be perceived as a rigid set of norms, but as a flexible product of human exchanges.

In addition to social order, the BCDSS’ research builds on the concept of agency (BCDSS 2021a, 8–9; Thompson 1963; Gell 1998; Latour 2005; Haraway 2003; Holzinger 2004; see also Frank 2006). However, in light of recent criticism of this notion (Johnson 2003; Needell 2001), it is suggested that agency should be understood not merely in terms of (violent) opposition or resistance, but rather as the opportunity to act within relations of asymmetrical dependency (Machado 2011; Schwartz 2002). As a result, the BCDSS proposes an understanding of agency based on the concept of *interagency* (Despret 2013; Shaw 2013; Schiel, Schürch, and Steinbrecher 2017), emphasizing that individual agency should always be studied in its relation to other actors.

Microhistory and Comparison

Two methodological problems that affect any major research endeavor in the humanities are also central to the research of the BCDSS (BCDSS 2021a, 5). They are, 1) the question of how to bring together the global and the local, or the macro and the micro; and, 2) the question of how to compare empirical findings across time and space in a meaningful way.

In regard to the first issue, scholars at the BCDSS have advocated a microhistorical approach that draws on existing work. With regard to the concept of “micro-spatial history”, De Vito and Gerritsen propose that “microhistory” can provide the “epistemological foundations” for a renewed social history “through its sensitivity to contextualization and historical distinctiveness through time and space”, while “spatial history can help micro-history to overcome its tendency to remain confined in geographically limited spaces and to conceptualize localities as self-sufficient units” (2018a, 15). Another approach prominent in current work at the BCDSS is the micro-historical approach put forward by Tomich and Zeuske

(2008) who understand “comparative microhistories” as an analysis of several smaller cases which together form the basis for a broader understanding of the issue at hand.

This brings us to the methodological challenge of comparison, which is one of the main goals of the BCDSS. Individual case studies or microhistories of asymmetrical dependency put forward over the coming years are intended to constitute the “new empirical basis for transcultural and diachronic comparison” (BCDSS 2021a, 10). The approach taken here is to combine long-term comparative history or *longue-durée* approaches (Haupt and Kocka 1996; Osterhammel 2000; Borgolte 2003) with connected or entangled histories (Conrad and Randeria 2002; Subrahmanyam 1997) in pursuit of a “decentering way of comparison” (Davis 2011; Trivellato 2011).

II. Theoretical and Methodological Reflections on Studying Asymmetrical Dependency

In the following part of this paper we elaborate on the theoretical assumptions summarized above. First, we aim to contribute to defining social relations of asymmetrical dependency by referring to current approaches of practice theory and new materialism as well as more classical approaches of critical theory. Second, we focus on the methodological issue of comparison and discuss a number of theoretical issues that are relevant to analytical thinking about comparison in dependency studies.

II.1. Practice-Oriented Approaches to Social Relations of Asymmetrical Dependency

As noted above, scholars at the BCDSS have advocated a microhistorical approach that facilitates a “history of relations” (Epple 2012, quoted in De Vito 2019, 351) and emphasizes “the centrality of historical agents, their practices and their strategies” (De Vito 2019, 349). With regard to slave history, Hanß and Schiel argue along similar lines for a praxeological approach that focuses on concrete “practices”, “life spheres”, and “social relationships” (2014, 18), and examines the concrete “scopes of action” of the actors involved. Such a perspective also shows, amongst other things, that the “figure of the slave is hybrid and fluid” (Hanß and Schiel 2014, 20) and that both scopes and constraints of action vary significantly depending on concrete contexts and situations.

In what follows, we take up these suggestions and adopt different theoretical concepts, some of which have been attributed to the so-called “ontological turn” in social and cultural theory (Holbraad and Pedersen 2017), while others belong to an older strand of neo-Marxist critical theory. Even though these different theories are often perceived as incompatible or even antagonistic (perhaps especially by protagonists of the “ontological turn”), our impression is that fully-developed theoretical stringency and coherence might not be the most important concern at this point of the theoretical discussion within the BCDSS. For now, we are still trying to understand how social relations of asymmetrical dependency emerge, how they are sustained in specific social settings, how the actors involved shape these relations in practical ways, and how their actions develop as social practices. In this endeavor, practice theory and new materialism may help us define “practice” more precisely, reconsider the nexus of structure and agency, and give us new ideas on how to understand the relevance of the “material” of the social settings examined, while critical theory reminds us that it is nonetheless necessary to consider how cultural phenomena of asymmetrical dependency are related to broader political and economic processes and structures, and shaped by power

relations. As we recalled above: the research perspective of the BCDSS ascribed four general characteristics to social relations of asymmetrical dependency: 1) asymmetrical dependencies are based on the ability of one actor (A) to [fully] control the actions and 2) access to resources¹ of another actor (B); 3) Actor A's position of power is defined by their potential to control Actor B's physical mobility; 4) social relations of asymmetrical dependency are usually supported by an institutional background that ensures that Actor B cannot exit the relationship (BCDSS, n.d.-a).

But how exactly can Actor A shape and maintain the social relationship of asymmetrical dependency "in practice" and what is Actor B's role within this relationship? Let us start with a brief definition of practice: Referring loosely to the definition by Andreas Reckwitz (2002) and Theodore R. Schatzki, a practice is a "temporally unfolding and spatially dispersed nexus of doings and sayings" (Schatzki 1996, 89). Practices can be understood as socially shared bundles of physical and mental actions carried out by at least one human actor interconnected with several elements such as technology, material artifacts, or organisms. Practices can be structured in terms of routines, i.e. the embodiment of practical understanding and knowing (e.g. riding a bike or crafts); by socially shared and more or less explicit rules and knowledge about how to act in specific social situations; or by what Schatzki has called "teleoaffective structures" (Schatzki 2002, 80), i.e. individual ends and motives and also emotions connected to certain bundles of activities, artifacts, organisms, and meanings (Schäfer 2019; Everts 2019).

II.1.1 Sayings, Doings, and Interagency

Sayings

*Sayings*² as micro-elements of social practices are linked to what in the cluster application (BCDSS 2021a, 7–8) is referred to as "worldviews" or, more precisely, worldviews-in-action, i.e. written or spoken worldviews. Most sources that help us understand past forms of asymmetrical dependency draw on *sayings*, i.e. all kinds of symbolic-discursive expressions and socially regulated productions of cultural representations, such as sculptures, images, or texts. Firstly, sayings draw on and actualize discursive value concepts and orders of knowledge that invisibly shape social relations of asymmetrical dependency. They are articulated and appear as normal and self-evident (e.g. common-sense knowledge, sensory experiences, or everyday classifications of the social world) and, hence, are more difficult to reflect upon. Following Louis Althusser (1971), such orders of knowledge can be conceived in terms of an "ideology" that structures people's imaginations and their lived experiences. This is the case, for example, when from the perspective of the dominant social order and the political systems and economic structures connected to it – and in many cases also for the oppressed –, social relations of asymmetrical dependency appear to be self-evident, the results of an alleged

¹ Resources in the sense of economic, cultural, and social capital (Bourdieu 1986) may be, firstly, financial means or various kinds of property (economic capital), such as farmland or working equipment; secondly, different types of knowledge such as education (cultural capital), e.g. the ability to read and write or crafting skills. Thirdly, resources may be valuable and influential social relationships to other actors and networks (social capital), e.g. relationships with prestigious or wealthy members of a local community who can advocate on behalf of Actor B, or certain alliances of actors who are in a similar position and who join forces to contest local social orders of asymmetrical dependency.

² For a more elaborate discussion of the concept of "sayings" see Schatzki 2017.

'natural order'. However, sayings articulating such orders of knowledge are not to be understood in terms of a "false consciousness": they materialize in practices and institutions. Secondly, sayings can be part of more explicit articulations of worldviews, be it in written or oral form, e.g. programmatic and ideological statements on the moral legitimacy of asymmetrical dependency and associated value concepts. Thirdly, sayings can be part of articulated worldviews that draw on historical or spiritual narratives or visions of the future, e.g. etiologies or religious imaginations of heaven and hell.

It is also important to distinguish between sayings that articulate orthodox worldviews which actualize and reproduce dominant orders of knowledge that normalize social relations of asymmetrical dependency, and those which articulate heterodox worldviews that contest and challenge dominant orders of knowledge, as was and is the case with different forms of abolitionism and within certain ethnic or religious groups (see Köstlbauer 2019).

For the concrete and practical shaping of a certain social relationship of asymmetrical dependency, it might be of importance how Actor B relates to dominant orders of knowledge that suggest a normalizing view of certain phenomena of the social and material world. Actor B may have adopted such worldviews themselves: those worldviews might appear to them as natural and self-evident, commonsensical views of the social world. In this sense, drawing on what Bourdieu calls "symbolic violence" (Bourdieu 1994), Actor B would actively and practically contribute to the reproduction of the social relationship of asymmetrical dependency and the associated order of knowledge that legitimizes it. In addition, they might also have a conscious interest in maintaining the relationship, as it may provide them with more social and physical security compared to other social positions, or even open up long-term prospects of emancipation (see Rossi 2020). On the other hand, Actor B may (individually or collectively) develop a heterodox view from their more reflected and distanced position towards orders of knowledge that legitimize their asymmetrical dependency, which may lead to them (individually or collectively) developing resistance against the constraints in which they find themselves (see e.g. Wimmeler in BCDSS 2021b, 16–17, 20). In addition, we cannot assume that there is just one order of knowledge at work at any given time. We should instead expect multi-faceted emic worldviews-in-action both legitimizing and contesting social relations of asymmetrical dependency. Given this, we must also assume more complex processes of cultural translation and negotiation, which have been understood and defined, especially in the context of postcolonial theories, in terms of "creolization" (Brathwaite 1995) or "hybridization" (Bhabha 1994). In these processes, we find, to put it simply, creative forms of recombining and mixing different elements into new cultural codes. Similarly, we need to consider how subaltern knowledge, e.g. in the sense of alternative epistemologies of indigenous groups forced into social relations of asymmetrical dependency, relates to knowledge orders that legitimize the dominant position of Actor A.

Whenever Actor A assumes a position of power which allows them to practically shape and maintain a social relationship of asymmetrical dependency, this is tied to practices (including sayings) in terms of socially regulated practices of self- and other-categorization (e.g. caste, religion, gender, or ethnicity). This is also the case for the coercion of actor B into the position of being asymmetrically dependent with limited power to shape and interpret the relationship, and restricted access to resources. Such social categorizations may be articulated in terms such as "slave" or "servant" and/or expressed by body markings, such as tattoos, brandings, earrings, shaved heads or certain types of clothing, or by certain behaviors, e.g. gestures like touching or the lack thereof (see the work of Sinah Kloß on tattoos and on "haptic

regimes”; Kloß 2020; Kloß in BCDSS 2021b, 16). The categorization may be a process of self- and/or other-categorization and identification. Therefore, we follow De Vito's advice to consider how social relationships of asymmetrical dependency draw on “markers of social differentiation” (De Vito n.d., 9; see Hirschauer 2014). He refers to Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality that calls for examining “the way power has clustered around certain categories and is exercised against others” (1991, 1297), which is important for exploring “how multilateral processes of categorization are connected with processes of subordination” (De Vito 2019, 363). Furthermore, we need to consider how these practices of self- and other-categorization and the use of markers of differentiation draw on, relate to, and thus articulate certain discursive orders of knowledge.

Focusing on worldviews from the perspective of their practical articulation also means that certain terms (such as “slave” or “servant”), narratives, and ideologies, should be conceived of as emic “concepts in action” (Schiel 2020, 162, see also Graf 2021, 11). As such, they do not simply express and represent the material world, but are performatively involved in the practical shaping of social relationships of asymmetrical dependency, and their meaning relies heavily on the context of their use.

Doings

Doings can be part of practices in terms of more conscious and intentional acts of physical action. An example might be a publicly celebrated act of physical punishment of Actor B by Actor A in front of an audience of other dependents. During this act, Actor A is fully aware of their actions and consciously follows certain rules and scripts in order to demonstrate their (i.e. Actor A's) power and thereby maintains the social order of asymmetrical dependency. Such doings by Actor B may be, for example, certain gestures of submission required and performed in official ceremonies; or, conversely, acts of resistance by which Actor B objects to particular gestures of submission. Such practices, which are put on public display, confirm the social order that defines and legitimates the social relation of asymmetrical dependency and the positions of power which define it.

Secondly, doings can be part of practices in terms of less consciously or intentionally employed, routinized physical actions, such as habitualized micro-gestures of appreciation and affection, or routinized and embodied skills like walking or crafting, or even skills of effective punishment (e.g. flogging) and subtle reward. Such practices can be understood as skillful performances, in that the actors use their bodies to follow specific scripts and their actions are shaped by incorporated skills, tacit knowledge of behavioral expectations in different situations of social interaction, or knowledge of the emotional effects of certain actions, e.g. how to provoke anger or evoke empathy and compassion in other actors. These skillful performances can also be understood in terms of Bourdieu's notion of “hexis” (1977, 87), i.e. an embodiment of structures of asymmetrical dependency that shapes the subordinated actor's posture or the way they speak, e.g. how they employ a certain accent. Such skillful performances of asymmetrical dependency can either be developed in early socialization into a social relationship of asymmetrical dependency, or through repeated and forced “dressage” to a point where one can speak of an embodiment or, in Bourdieu's words, a “somatization of the relation of domination” (Bourdieu 2001, 56).

Interagency

At the same time, we have to take into account that the social positions of Actors A and B are never perfectly stable, as they always depend on physical, oral, or written actualization and iteration in concrete doings and sayings. This is because every skillful performance of subjugating Actor B depends at least to some extent on Actor B's situative acknowledgment of their asymmetrical dependency, as well as their competence to perform their part of the doing appropriately, e.g. through a socially defined and ritualized gesture of subjection. This always involves the possibility of failure. Similarly, any cultural representation that draws on *sayings*, e.g. a picture that shows a pharaoh slaying an enemy, requires someone to interpret it as an expression of power and social domination, which also involves the possibility of deliberate or unintended misinterpretation – especially by those meant to be subjugated. Every social relationship of asymmetrical dependency includes the potential threat of being contested and challenged. Social history addresses this problem through the concept of “agency”, which, alongside “social order”, is a key concept of the BCDSS's theoretical framework (BCDSS 2021a, 7–9). However, asymmetrical dependency in terms of a power relation should neither be understood as unidirectional nor as a characteristic of individuals (Robb 2010, 499). Instead, we should conceive agency as “fundamentally social” (Robb 2010, 499) and, therefore, situate it within the relation between different actors. Schiel and others have suggested replacing it with the notion of “interagency” or “co-activity” (Schiel, Schürch, and Steinbrecher 2017). This understands Actors A and B to be situated in a dynamic relation of social interdependency which is shaped by the actions of both actors and multiple forms of agency (*Handlungsträgerschaft[en]*) (Schiel, Schürch, and Steinbrecher 2017, 22). Understanding asymmetrical dependency as interagency or interdependency opens up the terrain for various forms of self-empowerment, such as resistance or more ambiguous acts of subversive objection or appropriation. It also means shifting the analytical focus from individual actors to processes of cultural translation (and their moments of productive failure): i.e. the translations or decodings of knowledge and meaning from one social context into another that take place in the “in-between”, as well as the material conditions that facilitate them. Furthermore, such an approach may suggest extending the status of ‘actorship’ to a multitude of entities involved in social relations of asymmetrical dependency, as we will argue in the next section.

Possible research questions:

- *Which worldviews are ignored or silenced in order to maintain asymmetrical dependency? (see Hellmann in BCDSS 2021b, 18; Hellmann, forthcoming)*
- *How do emic worldviews of asymmetrically dependent groups relate to social relations of asymmetrical dependency? How do such concepts serve as heterodox signifying practices? How are they “translated” into social orders of asymmetrical dependency and change their meaning to maintain such orders?*
- *Which actors categorize and mark subjugated people as “other”, and how, i.e. by which signs, symbols, and notions? During which processes of asymmetrical dependency, e.g. colonization, are which signs, symbols, and notions translated into specific markers of “otherness”, and which groups use them in which way and to what end as “concepts in action”?*
- *Which doings does Actor A employ consciously to create, maintain, actualize, and enforce the subjection of Actor B?*
- *Which routines and scripts do they follow?*

- *What kind of knowledge structures their doings?*
- *How are the skillful performances of asymmetrical dependency defined? Which knowledge, gestures, meanings, and emotions do they comprise?*
- *How is the process defined during which Actor B embodies their status within the social relationship of asymmetrical dependency? What practices does it comprise, which material artefacts and forms of knowledge does it include?*

II.1.2 Thinking Asymmetrical Dependency Beyond Human Actors

When discussing the concept of “interagency”, we need to address the – rather ontological – question of whether the position of *actor* should be limited to human actors or whether other organisms such as animals and plants or even entities such as gods and spirits can also be conceived as actors within social relations of asymmetrical dependency.³ It could be argued that it would dilute the BCDSS’s research perspective to expand the group that can be considered as Actors A and B in that way, since our main interest is to understand asymmetrical dependency as a characteristic of *human social order*, i.e. how *people* are able to force other *people* into social relations of asymmetrical dependency, and which properties of the specific relation allow what scope of action or resistance to the *people* in the subjugated position. On the other hand, it is necessary to take into account critiques of restricting ‘actorship’ to human beings, and in particular criticism of Western models of personhood (Strathern 1988). Moreover, if we take the concept of interagency seriously, we have to consider how people interact with other entities. One could, for example, consider if a domesticated horse as a living and non-human member of an army negotiates its social relationship of asymmetrical dependency to its rider to some extent, such as when it refuses to move due to exhaustion, and thus affects the rider’s scope of action within this relationship and also the rider’s relationship to other people such as his officer who could punish or demote him for his poor performance. Similarly, one could argue that the assumption that a divine being has instituted a particular social order might both stabilize and restrict A’s power over B. Such a belief might reduce the potential for change. At the same time, a divine order demanding a certain behavior towards others, such as the “golden rule”, might restrict the scope for violence towards an asymmetrically dependent actor even if the societal norms sanction it. Furthermore, when considering gods, demons, spirits, etc. as actors within relationships of asymmetrical dependency, we might ask to what extent human actors and members of a particular social group claim to execute control on behalf of these entities. These relationships then become very much comparable to, for example, slave owners who delegate the execution of punishment and control of mobility to other servants or slaves or – one might argue – even to walls, fences, iron collars, or chains.

Last but not least, these questions concern not only epistemological issues but also the ontological status of one of the most important sources through which we seek to understand past social relations of asymmetrical dependency: *material artifacts* such as the remains of sculptures, pots, tools, weapons, architecture, or even manufactured landscapes such as agricultural terraces (see e.g. Mader in BCDSS 2021b, 16). In twentieth-century archaeology and ancient history, such material artifacts were usually examined with regard to what they

³ With reference to some newer strands of the cognitive science of religion, it might be interesting to think in more detail about how to understand “culturally postulated agents” (Whitehouse 2004: 49) in general as actors in relationships of asymmetrical dependency.

revealed about social relations between people, such as symbolic meanings, social status, everyday practices, or knowledge. The importance of material culture as components of social relations and social practices has received more attention from both historians and social scientists since at least the 1980s (Appadurai 1986; Miller 1998). But it is only recently and in the spirit of the “New Materialism” (Barad 2003; Latour [2005] 2007; DeLanda 2006; Bennett 2009) within the social sciences that historians have considered the relevance of “material agency” (Van Oyen 2018), i.e. how “the capacity to act emerges through participating in relationships with other people and material things” (Robb 2010, 502; Gell 1998). Referring to Gell (1998), Robb (2010) has argued that the researcher’s differentiation between human and non-human actors relies heavily on the epistemological differentiation between intentionality and causation (Robb 2010, 505). In contrast to this assumption he claims that “in certain social settings, things both make people do things and are understood culturally as making people do things, much in the same way other people do” (Robb 2010, 505). Within social anthropology, Bruno Latour (2005) in particular has argued along those lines. Latour assigns ‘things’ the status of actors within actor-networks, as they are involved in and make a difference to human action. In the words of Van Oyen, “material objects have an effect on the course of action that is irreducible to direct human intervention” (Van Oyen 2018, 1). For example, in the case of a human being (Actor A) coercing another human being (Actor B) to serve by threatening to kill or hurt them with a cane or a knife, one should rather understand Actor A as a powerful actor-network consisting of the human being with the capacity to carry a weapon and the utilized weapon which affords certain kinds of bodily and symbolical usage to act powerfully, such as hurting Actor B or representing a higher social position.

However, and despite the danger of Eurocentrism, one might still feel uncomfortable with suspending the distinction between humans and other entities completely in the case of social relations of asymmetrical dependency, especially as in this field of research we are concerned with people who have been – and continue to be – subjected to enormous suffering by other people. For this reason, and because of epistemological concerns, we suggest maintaining a theoretical difference between human agency and the way non-human entities are involved in the practical negotiation of social relationships of asymmetrical dependency. In doing so, we follow Schiel, Schürch, and Streinbrecher (2017) in understanding such organisms and material artifacts as “mediators” (*Mittler*) that structure the relationship between human Actors A and B. For example, certificates of release, working equipment whose use requires certain skills and knowledge, clothes that function as markers of a subjugated social position, or instruments used for physical punishment, can all function as mediators and, thus, may be involved in the negotiation or reproduction of asymmetrical dependency. Much in the same way, gods and spirits, who in some contexts assume the roles of actors in asymmetrical relationships, could also be understood as mediators, as they are not only articulated in sermons and prayers, writings, or physical actions such as ritualized performances, but also often depicted and materialized in temples, sculptures, and other artifacts, or regarded as manifest in nature, i.e. in trees or mountains. Scholar of religion Birgit Meyer calls such constellations of media – that are “produced, authorized, and authenticated within religious traditions and groups” – “sensational forms” and describes them as the modes “through which a professed transcendent becomes real for those partaking in them” (2020, §7, §13).

All these mediators do not simply express the relationship between Actors A and B without affecting it. Instead, one has to take into account the material mediators’ “affordances” (Gibson 1977; Keane 2018; Norman [1988] 2013) in the sense that they suggest or call for certain forms of doings and sayings and therefore make a difference in regard to the

relationship. Considering the affordances of organisms, spirits and gods, or material artifacts within human social relations of asymmetrical dependency, we suggest that these relations can neither be understood fully as the result of the operation of conscious actions and ideas of human actors, nor can they be explained solely in terms of the operation of economic forces.

Possible research questions:

- *Which concepts, organisms and material artifacts make a difference within a social relation of asymmetrical dependency in which way?*
- *How exactly do actor-networks consisting of human beings, forms of knowledge, organisms, and material artifacts form into social relations of asymmetrical dependency?*
- *How can we best conceive of the actor status and agency of God, gods, or spirits within a relation of asymmetrical dependency in regard to their assumed personhood, which is a central issue not only for monotheistic theologies, but also e.g. in the Indian traditions?*

II.1.3 Asymmetrical Dependency and Social Order – Contexts and Constellations

So far, we have proposed some theoretical notions that allow us to trace and better understand the different components of social relations of asymmetrical dependency within local social settings. We have argued that the study of social relations of asymmetrical dependency needs to consider not only human actors and their intended actions and meanings, but different and heterogeneous entities such as gods and spirits, other organisms, and material artifacts. In doing so, we have argued for a perspective of practice theory that focuses on interagency, rather than assuming these social relations to be unidirectional. Furthermore, we have shown to some extent how the practices of different human actors within social relations of asymmetrical dependency are socially structured. Even though we already understand these relations as a network of heterogeneous actors, practices, meanings, and material artifacts, the question remains how we can conceive them as “context-specific” social relationships (Hanß and Schiel 2014, 15). How are they situated within broader and translocal networks and the inherent power relations, e.g. institutionalized political and legal or economic structures, that maintain and stabilize them over time and space, cause their transformation into something different, or even lead to their dissolution? Reflecting on this question, we confirm that the concept of “social order” is of central importance for the BCDSS, just as it is for a social history approach in general.

With this in mind, however, we must be aware of different understandings of context and contextualization, which can refer to very different analytical operations. For example, one could contextualize by explaining local social relations of asymmetrical dependency in terms of a background that defines or a framework that surrounds them, such as an economic or a discursive structure. The danger of such an approach to contextualization is that it could result in an analytic procedure that explains a studied and empirically observable phenomenon C (e.g., a locally situated and context-specific saying or doing) through the structuring force of phenomenon D (e.g., a social formation as a whole) without being able to show how exactly C and D are related. This may also imply presupposing the existence of a structured totality

through which, in some invisible way, some or all phenomena are systematically articulated according to and determined by the totality's structuring principle.

Instead, we suggest a mode of analysis which De Vito, Schiel, and van Rossum have termed "radical contextualization" (2020, 649). We understand this approach as suggesting that one has to examine how exactly social relations of asymmetrical dependency emerge at concrete sites and in "specific economic sectors" (De Vito, Schiel, and van Rossum 2020, 649) or other social or political realms, to describe the complex and sometimes contradictory concurrence of political, economic, and social forces, and how the actors themselves perceive them. Thus, we argue for an approach to contextualization that examines how the different components of local settings of asymmetrical dependency, i.e. local "bundles" of actions, artifacts, and meanings, are actually related to and resonate with broader, translocal, and more complex "webs of relations and practices" (Marston, Jones, and Woodward 2005, 419) which, with Schatzki, we might call "constellations" (Schatzki 2016).⁴ These webs may be legal constellations consisting of legislation, legal documents such as contracts, authority buildings such as courthouses, and institutionalized actors such as judges and other representatives of state institutions, or any other form of institutionalized legal order. A broader economic constellation may connect the social settings of plantations or farms, markets, and marketplaces to currencies as well as specific (labor) practices and social relations such as labor or trade relations that define artifacts, organisms (e.g. natural resources), and people as means of production, resources, or commodities.

Following Anna Tsing (2015), we could, for example, follow commodity chains of asymmetrical dependency and examine how different socialities of asymmetrical dependency, e.g. different kinds of longer-lasting social relations between a variety of actors related to each other via kinship, processes and sites of economic production, or religious or ethnic communities, emerge or become involved in different local settings linked by these chains. We could ask how the social status of asymmetrically dependent actors, their scope of action, and the social categorizations and understandings attributed to them, change when translated into different social, cultural, economic, and political contexts. In the same vein, we could scrutinize how their embeddedness in larger legal or economic constellations and, thus, their connectedness to various local social relations of asymmetrical dependency in various sites, can facilitate possibilities of collective resistance, i.e. of contesting social relations of asymmetrical dependency and the orders of knowledge that legitimize and naturalize them.

The concurrence of the different social relations connected within these constellations causes and at the same time ensures the inability of asymmetrically dependent actors to simply suspend the social relation of asymmetrical dependency and walk away. However, it is important to emphasize again that local settings are not fully determined by these constellations. As Doreen Massey has argued,

⁴ It would be interesting to discuss how the praxeological notion of "constellation" relates to the neo-Marxist concept of "social formation" (Althusser and Balibar 1970), defined as the "totality of instances articulated on the basis of a determinate mode of production", especially as some members of the BCDSS use the term "social formation" in a rather similar way (De Vito, Schiel, and van Rossum 2020; Schiel and De Vito 2020). We would then also need to discuss if and how the neo-Marxist (and rather structuralist) related concept of "totality" can still be useful as a tool within an analytical approach to asymmetrical dependency that seeks to understand the complex relations between economic, political, social, and cultural dynamics.

“‘places’ are criss-crossings in the wider power-geometries which constitute both themselves and ‘the global’. In this view local places are not simply always the victims of the global; nor are they always politically defensible redoubts *against* the global. For places are also the moments through which the global is constituted, invented, coordinated, produced. They are ‘agents’ *in* globalization.” (2004, 11, emphasis in original).

Local social relations of asymmetrical dependency, therefore, actualize and stabilize social orders of asymmetrical dependency by being performed at multiple sites by multiple actors simultaneously and by being reproduced continuously over time, drawing on powerful social structures such as class, race, or gender. In drawing on such a theoretical understanding of social relations and constellations of asymmetrical dependency, the task of both a historical exploration of asymmetrical dependency and of research focusing on the present would be to study how local social relations of asymmetrical dependency form and materialize, and how they are connected and contribute to the stabilization of broader constellations understood as “the complex of concrete political, economic, and ideological relations” (De Vito, Schiel, and van Rossum 2020, 648).

Possible research questions:

- *Which components of local social relations of asymmetrical dependency, e.g. actors, skills, tools, narratives, or other meanings, things, and organisms, are linked to and translated into which other local bundles or more complex constellations in which way? Does a practice travel to different local settings as a whole, or in single components?*
- *Which kind of socialities emerge, or become involved, in the commodity chains or infrastructures linked to asymmetrical dependency?*
- *How does the social status of asymmetrically dependent actors, their scope of action, and the social categorizations and understandings attributed to them change when translated into different social, cultural, economic, and political contexts?*
- *How does the embeddedness of local settings of asymmetrical dependency in larger legal or economic constellations facilitate possibilities of collective resistance?*

II.2 Comparison and Asymmetrical Dependency – Methodological Considerations

As discussed in section I.2.3 above, the question of comparison has from the beginning been described as one of the central methodological challenges for the BCDSS. The praxeological approach we propose in this paper has led us to identify complex constellations of translocal webs of relations and practices in which local forms of asymmetrical dependency are embedded. In this sense, how we understand the “macro-micro-divide” and the relations between the local and the global (a second fundamental methodological challenge identified for the BCDSS; see BCDSS 2021a, 9) is closely connected to the issue of comparison. But even though the call for “comparative microhistories” (Tomich and Zeuske 2008, 95–97) and the preference for a “micro-spatial” approach (De Vito and Gerritsen 2018b) expressed in the cluster application – which we have also taken up in this paper – imply a very specific

assessment of the complex interdisciplinary debate on comparison⁵, it seems helpful to first engage in a broader exploration of existing approaches to – as well as critiques of – comparison.

In any case, as often fundamentally comparative endeavors, the individual projects of the BCDSS should include self-reflexive investigations of practices and processes of comparison in order to continuously refine and rectify our analytical categories, and to further develop the concept of asymmetrical dependency. In this section we will, therefore, explore some preliminary suggestions for dealing with the question of comparison. We will, first, address critiques of the comparative endeavor as such and particularly the challenge of historicizing and provincializing points of comparison (II.2.1). This will be followed by a presentation of recent attempts at modelling comparison in the study of religion, which could contribute to developing a sophisticated understanding of comparison at the BCDSS (II.2.2). The section will close with reflections on how to relate these abstract considerations of the process of comparison to the specific context of dependency studies (II.2.3).

II.2.1 Provincializing Comparison: Critique and Historicization

An important aim of the detailed engagement with current approaches of micro-history and praxeology in order to theorize key dynamics of asymmetrical dependency in this paper is to facilitate comparisons between individual case studies. Comparison has repeatedly been identified as a central task in various statements and publications, but the BCDSS has not yet begun to engage in an in-depth debate on the theoretical issues this practice might entail. By drawing on recent work in the study of religion, the following deliberations are going to suggest some general starting points for developing a complex understanding of how to think about comparison.⁶ Comparative approaches are often divided into *synchronic* (cross-societal or cross-cultural) comparisons and *diachronic* comparisons (historical, e.g. trans-epochal) – a distinction that is also repeatedly mentioned in the cluster application. However, if the BCDSS wants to fulfil its promise of delivering a “new empirical basis for transcultural and diachronic comparison” in dependency studies (BCDSS 2021a, 10), a more complex understanding of comparison seems necessary. In shifting the focus to the descriptive terminology of

⁵ The most theoretically succinct explications of this position can be found in De Vito and Gerritsen 2018a, 8–9 and De Vito 2019, 358–359, 362–363. For this “micro-spatial” approach that wants to think “beyond the local/global divide” and study “connected singularities”, macro-analytical comparisons are to be rejected as presupposing large units and isolating them theoretically. Instead, as De Vito argues, our comparisons should take “direct and indirect entanglements between the units that are being compared” into account (2019, 358). He continues: “Taken as a whole, these approaches make us rethink comparison as the analysis of the dialectics between the specificity and connectivity of each place, and as the ethnographic study of the impact of multifaceted connections on different sites.” (De Vito 2019, 358). While we agree regarding the importance of rethinking comparison from a global history perspective that focuses on entanglements, we want, for now, to leave open the question of whether this approach precludes rethinking macro-analytical comparisons as well (see also section II.2.3 below).

⁶ While all disciplines in the humanities and social sciences perform comparative work (Felski and Friedmann 2013, 1–2), discussions about issues of comparison have played different roles in various fields. Anthropology (cf. Scheffer and Niewöhner 2010; Antweiler 2016; Candea 2019; Schnegg and Lowe 2020) and history (Kaelble and Schriewer 2003; Haupt and Kocka 2009; Krom 2021), for example, have at various points in time engaged in extensive debates on the topic. The study of religion, often also labeled “comparative religion”, has from its inception struggled with the question of how to conceptualize and compare ‘religions’ across cultures, and across space and time (Segal 2016). In this section, we therefore take this discipline as an – somewhat arbitrary, based on the expertise of one of the authors of this paper – starting point to reflect on issues of comparison.

“asymmetrical dependency”, the BCDSS attempts to develop an approach not biased towards Atlanto-centric or Graeco-Roman examples, a restriction which has been identified as a severely limiting factor in the field of slavery studies. Moving away from “slavery” as the central analytical and comparative category is therefore part of a wider attempt to avoid existing nostro-centrism – merely projecting findings about well-known (often Western) examples onto comparable phenomena in other social orders. This raises the question for each comparative project in the BCDSS of how to move beyond the “binary opposition of ‘slavery vs. freedom’” (BCDSS 2021a, 22). One possibility is to treat “asymmetrical dependency” itself as the point of comparison, a perspective implied in many current discussions at the BCDSS that ask whether a particular phenomenon can be understood *as a case of asymmetrical dependency*. Additionally, the concept of agency, which we reframed as *interagency* above, has also been suggested as a possible *tertium comparationis*. This points to an understanding of comparison according to which different case studies would be evaluated in terms of differing configurations of interagency that allow us to place them on the ‘continuum of dependency’. In any case, the question of determining a *point of comparison* is an essential part of setting up any comparative endeavor and therefore important to reflect upon for any particular study conducted at the BCDSS – we shall return to this point. But before we discuss some methodological distinctions that have been proposed in regard to modelling comparison, we need to address a couple of the many critiques of comparison as such.

The method of comparison has come under fire from a variety of angles (Steinmetz 2019, 5–8), in particular from a postcolonial perspective, as a practice that erases difference and should be considered an instrument of domination (Steinmetz 2019, 3–4). Instead of understanding it as a method to generate new insights, comparison has been criticized as a Eurocentric practice that imposes Western ideological categories onto other cultures, not merely as part of scholarly endeavors but as directly entangled with economic exploitation and colonial rule (Fitzgerald 2000, 34; Stoler 2001, 863). But the focus on insuperable difference proposed by some radical postcolonial critics has even more serious implications, as they maintain that “any practitioner of (nontrivial) comparison is inevitably bound to construct the compared units, as well as the categories needed to make the units comparable, by drawing on the conceptual apparatus of one particular language” (Steinmetz 2019, 6). In this perspective, it is the very attempt to create cross-cultural categories for comparison that makes the whole endeavor a “dubious enterprise” (Steinmetz 2019, 6). In this sense, the historical dominance of Western epistemic regimes and the role comparison plays in them is merely one of several aspects being critiqued.

A more basic refutation of comparison is that the practice itself is based on an illegitimate practice of abstraction. In creating a comparative ‘meta-language’, critics argue, one always draws on a particular linguistic tradition (Steinmetz 2019, 7), thus making ‘neutral’ comparison impossible. Some newer approaches in postcolonial studies, therefore, suggest a focus less on carrying out comparative work and more on analyzing the “politics of comparison”, i.e. the ways in which agents of empire and their political projects were involved in practices of comparison (Stoler 2001, 862). In the same vein, newer approaches that center on a historical investigation of different ‘practices of comparison’ (Epple and Erhart 2015), stress the situatedness of the act of comparison, expanding the triad of two *comparata* and a *tertium comparationis* into a tetrad that includes the *situational context* of the comparing actor (Epple 2015, 163). While it does seem neither possible nor fruitful to formulate a single position on these issues for the BCDSS as a whole, it is important for each individual comparative project

to reflect on these critiques of the comparative method, and to self-reflexively explicate the fundamental theoretical and methodological decisions.

In a recent article on comparison, Michael Bergunder (2016) discusses these insights of postcolonial criticism and attempts to apply them to the comparative study of religion. It is the selection and concretization of the 'point of comparison' (*tertium comparationis*) through which a common ground for comparison is identified and comparability is established as the abstraction of one particular element. Usually this means that the point of comparison stands in a privileged relationship to one of the elements to be compared (Bergunder 2016, 36–37). Only as a result of this first comparative act of establishing similarity on the basis of one of the elements, can relative differences and similarities between the compared examples be determined. This process results in an affirmation of the chosen point of comparison, which in most cases is indeed taken from a Western context, and therefore contributes to its justification and universalization. In his proposal for a 'provincialization' of Europe, historian Dipesh Chakrabarty has called for a historicization of this positioning of 'Europe' as the unquestioned prototype for scholarly comparisons (Bergunder 2016, 38; see also Austin 2007, 8–14). According to Chakrabarty, however, this situation – in which the prototypes for comparison have historically not been taken from non-European contexts – cannot be simply rectified through a reversal of the prototypical relationship by instead privileging 'non-Western' categories as *tertia comparationis*. There is no way in which we can "situate ourselves outside of the knowledge procedures of our institutions" (Chakrabarty 2000, 43) and outside of our "postcolonial present" in which we all have become "conscripts of modernity" (Scott 2004, 119, 107). Therefore, "[t]he project of provincializing Europe ... cannot be a project of cultural relativism" (Chakrabarty 2000, 43) that simply replaces 'European' with alternative 'local' categories. Rather, *provincializing Europe* is "so important because ... [of] the global and, notably, historical nature of the problem" (Bergunder 2016, 38). As a result of Europe's historical dominance, any self-understanding of "third world science" (Chakrabarty 2000, 29) has become inseparably entangled with a European perspective. The universalized terms of European theory "have a global history that inherently informs their meaning and plausibility" and they are also "nowadays ... used globally" (Bergunder 2016, 40, 39), forming the basis of both scholarly projects and everyday understandings of the social world.⁷

In rethinking our practices of comparison, Bergunder argues, we therefore have to account for both: the continuing relevance of Europe as the universal prototype *and* its historicization. We should strive to conceptualize comparison in a way that allows us to describe this ongoing Western conceptual hegemony, while at the same time revealing it as the result of historical processes. This does not imply that their status as global categories legitimizes the asymmetries of our established *tertia comparationis* – like 'religion', but also 'slavery' or 'freedom' – but rather suggests that what is needed is a genealogical investigation of their rise to universality *in relation to* the European prototypes they were abstracted from.⁸

⁷ This is why one could also argue that most of the variants of the "multiple modernities" approach (Eisenstadt 2002; Schwinn 2009) are not very helpful in overcoming this problem, as in trying to move beyond 'Western hegemony' they fail to recognize both the historical and the ongoing power of 'the West' that Chakrabarty captures so well. The contemporary world, as a result of contingent historical processes, is still a world profoundly shaped by Western (conceptual) power (see Asad 1992; Scott 1999; Scott 2004).

⁸ In a newer article, Bergunder (2020, 66–77) further develops his perspective of a historicizing alternative to the uncritical use of general comparative terms that forms part of what he calls a "regionalized thinking of origins"

Likewise, in working towards establishing alternative and much wider concepts like '(inter)agency' or 'asymmetrical dependency' that, depending on the individual project, might serve as *tertia comparationis*, the BCDSS does not claim to simply 'overcome' a Eurocentric perspective by moving beyond using the Western history of slavery as a privileged reference point for comparison. Rather, in an act of 'provincialization', projects of the BCDSS should strive to reflect on what a historicization of their chosen point of comparison might mean for their practices of comparison. Historically, Atlantic and/or Graeco-Roman slaveries have (often implicitly) been positioned as prototypes for any investigation of asymmetrical dependency. We have to recognize the global history of these categories and critically explore them (Bergunder 2016, 39), including a reflection on how existing practices of comparison have framed – and thereby shaped – historical phenomena as comparable (Bergunder 2016, 45). What would such an investigation of the history of classical concepts of 'slavery' and other forms of coerced labor look like? A self-reflection on the ways in which the history of the slavery-versus-freedom distinction itself "inherently informs ... [its] meaning and plausibility" (Bergunder 2016, 40), i.e. how it has itself contributed to making different phenomena comparable, could help us move beyond a practice of comparison that primarily upholds and camouflages European hegemony (Bergunder 2016, 40).

This brings us back to the central question of how to choose our *tertium comparationis* if indeed – despite the fundamental critique discussed above – comparison is so central to the overall project of the BCDSS. Each case study that posits comparisons not only has to decide what 'comparands' are being compared, but also what *tertium* informs this practice of comparison. Whether the focus lies on 'asymmetrical dependency' in different social orders more generally, or on 'agency' in order to explore situated forms of restraint and locate them on a continuum of dependency in particular historical situations, a clear and deliberate choice of a point of comparison is one of the most important ways in which we move away from a study of different forms of 'slavery' (a *tertium* for which the historical prototypes are abstractions of Graeco-Roman and transatlantic examples) and towards the establishment of a broader field of dependency studies.

If, in this way, we want to continue to understand the BCDSS project as fundamentally comparative, another important step will be the development of a more complex model and typology of different forms of comparison that goes beyond the classical distinction between 'synchronic' and 'diachronic' comparisons (referencing distances of both space and time). This will allow us to seriously work towards the goal of a transculturally comparative perspective that is proposed in the cluster application (BCDSS 2021a, 10).

Possible research questions:

- *How has an existing history of comparisons contributed to an understanding that the phenomena the project is looking at are comparable?*
- *How does the project determine the point of comparison?*
- *In what ways does the comparative project take into account or engage with the general critique formulated towards comparative projects? Does it account for the "politics of comparison"?*

(*regionalisiertes Ursprungsdenken*). For the study of religion he proposes the approach of a "global history of religion" that is based on a Foucauldian understanding of genealogy (on the concept of a global history of religion see also Hermann, forthcoming).

- *How does the project reflect the situatedness of the scholar(s) doing the comparison?*
- *What phenomenon as prototype is the project's point of comparison (tertium comparationis) abstracted from?*
- *How can the project contribute to a historicization of the chosen tertium beyond the concrete comparative project?*

II.2.2 Modelling Comparison – Perspectives from the Study of Religion

Taking a somewhat arbitrary starting point, in what follows we are going to once more draw on recent debates in the study of religion and present some theoretical models of comparison that might be relevant for future comparative studies of asymmetrical dependency. The concluding section of this part (II.2.3) will then attempt to connect our abstract reflections on the critique and the modelling of comparison with the research interests of the BCDSS and the concept of asymmetrical dependency. Rather than proposing a single model that all members of the BCDSS should adopt, we will instead try to offer some starting points that allow scholars to reflect on their own practices of comparison and locate their individual and collective projects in relation to the taxonomies, axes, and possible distinctions among comparisons discussed here. Both approaches we will present – Freiberger's reflections on modes, scales, scopes, and five operations of comparison, as well as Aspren's fourfold typology – can thus contribute to a metatheoretical debate about comparison within the BCDSS.

In his comprehensive recent monograph on the comparative method in the study of religion, historian Oliver Freiberger suggests that the first necessary steps for comparison are the abstraction of the comparands, i.e. the units being compared (Freiberger 2019, 82–94), and the establishing of the *tertium comparationis* (the 'point of comparison') (Freiberger 2019, 94–96). In terms of the *practice* of comparison, he distinguishes between modes, scales, and scopes of comparison. *Mode* describes the "different styles of comparison" that reflect the general goals of a particular study, *scale*⁹ indicates the level of 'zooming in' along an axis of micro, meso, and macro comparison, and *scope* focuses on the "potential relations between the comparands" in order to distinguish between "contextual, cross-cultural, and transhistorical comparisons" (Freiberger 2019, 115–116).

Freiberger (2019, 126) considers two *modes* to be of particular relevance to the study of religion: in the asymmetric mode of 'illuminative comparison', drawing on other cases is meant to allow for the recognition of blind spots and a further profiling of the case at hand (Freiberger 2019, 126–127); a 'taxonomic comparison' aims at a symmetric comparison on the basis of scholarly categories as "consciously constructed abstractions" (Freiberger 2019, 127) and leads to generalizations and acts of classification, akin to biological taxonomy. The second-

⁹ The concept of "scale" and in particular a distinction between micro, meso, and macro has been critiqued by some of the scholars connected to the BCDSS (e.g. De Vito 2019). In certain ways it also stands at odds with the praxeological approach elaborated in the first part of our paper, which implies a "flat ontology" (Schatzki 2016) (II.1). Despite these critiques, however, determining scale is a classical aspect of the comparative method, and for now our reconstruction of Freiberger's argument primarily serves the purpose of presenting a recent example of a complex modelling of comparison. A detailed discussion of De Vito's critique and of how to deal with scale in the context of the "comparative microhistories" proposed by Tomich and Zeuske (2008, 95–97) and favored in the cluster application (BCDSS 2021a, 7) will have to be discussed in a future paper. We will, however, briefly return to this point in section II.2.3.

order categories produced in this process have to be constantly revised; and different modes are not mutually exclusive but can overlap or appear side by side (Freiberger 2019, 129).

Each selection of comparands already indicates a certain level of abstraction (individuals, groups, cities, regions, states, etc.), pointing to the *scale* of comparison (Freiberger 2019, 131). Traditionally, 'micro', 'meso', and 'macro' have been used to describe these different scales, but most important is a transparent reflection on the scale used for a particular comparison and an open consideration of objections like superficiality, essentialization, or arbitrariness (Freiberger 2019, 134). The choice of scale implies a theoretical construction of comparands at *all* levels (micro, meso, and macro) and therefore, Freiberger argues, e.g. "a micro comparative approach does not automatically prevent essentialization" (Freiberger 2019, 140). Rather than concentrating on a single scale, he proposes that "responsible research design ... avoids drawing conclusions that transgress the limits set by the selected scale" (2019, 143).

This also applies to *scope*, "the distance between the items compared in a study" which "indicates potential relations between the comparands" (Freiberger 2019, 143). Freiberger (2019: 143) distinguishes contextual ("within one historical context or cultural milieu"), cross-cultural ("beyond postulated cultural boundaries"), and transhistorical ("comparisons across time" that "always appear in conjunction with one of the other two") scopes. The "context" designates the shared "spatial and cultural environment" of the comparands (Freiberger 2019, 144). A "*relational* comparison" with a contextual scope begins with an expectation of direct relations between the compared items (a "homology"), but establishes their nature (e.g. "negotiations", "mutual appropriations", or "reciprocal impact") only as a result of the study (Freiberger 2019, 145). Even if contextual comparisons are often local, they can also address "very large, even global" contexts, studying relations transculturally (Freiberger 2019, 146). If the comparison is "cross-cultural", it goes beyond a single context and compares items from "different cultural spheres or milieus" without assuming them to be historically related. The identified similarities are "not expected to be caused by influence, dependency, or any other direct relationship" (Freiberger 2019, 146). Understood in this sense, cross-cultural comparisons are always analogical (Freiberger 2019, 147). A "trans-historical scope" indicates a combination of contextual or cross-cultural scope with a comparison of comparands "located at different points in time" (Freiberger 2019, 148).

An alternative typology that provides a different model of comparison was recently proposed by Egil Asprem (2014, 21–22) for the study of Esotericism. It consists of a matrix of four types of comparison along the two axes *analogical/homological* (borrowed from biology) and *synchronic/diachronic* (derived from structural linguistics). 'Homological similarities' are based on a common ancestry,¹⁰ while 'analogical similarities' are independent of direct relations. The *synchronic/diachronic* distinction indicates the temporal dimension of the comparison, in the same period or across historical epochs. This results in four types. An *analogical-synchronic* comparison relates two contemporaneous phenomena with respect to "some analytic construct or feature" (Asprem 2014, 23). The *analogical-diachronic* type compares phenomena from different historical periods "without grounding the comparison in a genealogical link between them" (Asprem 2014, 23). In both cases, the comparison serves to

¹⁰ Rather than restricting the model to this 'biological' understanding of homology, it might be useful to adopt Freiberger's proposal of reframing homological comparisons as "relational comparison[s]" (Freiberger 2019, 145), which presuppose direct relations between comparands but attempt to establish their concrete nature only as the result of the comparison, not as its prerequisite.

establish or refine analytical meta-linguistic categories. In contrast, in projects of “historicist comparison” (Asprem 2014, 23), a *homological-synchronic* comparison of contemporaneous phenomena looks for common genealogical relations, which justify their comparison “with regard to a theoretically relevant tertium comparationis” (Asprem 2014, 25). The *homological-diachronic* type establishes a temporal genealogical relationship between two comparands (*a* is the ancestor of *b*) and is often interested in establishing “significant *discontinuities*” (Asprem 2014, 25). In the end, Asprem (2014, 30) argues, that what is needed for “drastic revisions to classification” – a goal the BCDSS set for itself in regard to moving beyond ‘slavery and freedom’ toward dependency studies – is a “combination of analogical and homological comparison”.

Returning to Freiburger’s discussion of the comparative method, his model of the concrete process of comparison proposes five separate operations: “selection, description and analysis, juxtaposition, redescription, and rectification/theory formation” (Freiburger 2019, 150–160). Selecting the comparands and point of comparison, as well as scope, scale, and mode, establishes the basis for a contextualized description of the comparands – via a “double contextualization” (Smith 2000, 239) in both the historical-cultural and the existing scholarly context (Freiburger 2019, 153). Through juxtaposition, the comparands are placed in a relation which attempts to establish both their similarities *and* differences vis-à-vis the chosen *tertium comparationis*. The last step consists of a redescription of the comparands as a result of the comparison and a rectification of the chosen second-order or “meta-linguistic” categories.

Possible research questions:

- *How is the project modeling comparison? What understanding and systematic approach to the comparative process is the project based on?*
- *What is the mode of comparison chosen for the project? Is it studying one phenomenon to put another phenomenon in a different light? Or is the goal of the comparison a taxonomic systematization?*
- *What is the scale on which comparison is performed in the project? Is it focusing on micro, meso, or macro perspectives? How is the project dealing with the existing criticism of scalar thinking?*
- *What is the scope of the comparison(s) in the project? What relations between the compared phenomena is the project presupposing or taking into account?*
- *What understanding of the concrete process of comparison is the project based on? (e.g. Freiburger’s five operations of “selection, description and analysis, juxtaposition, redescription, and rectification/theory formation”).*

II.2.3 Comparison and Dependency Studies

In the section above, we presented rather classical attempts to provide some concepts and distinctions for comparison, in order to identify some starting points for future debates. In this last section, we want to discuss some of these points with reference to the praxeological approach outlined in the first part of this paper, and raise some questions related to asymmetrical dependency and comparison at the BCDSS. As the development of a transcultural comparative perspective has been described as central to the project of moving beyond the “Eurocentric framework of the conceptual pair of ‘slavery vs. freedom’” (BCDSS 2021a, 3), we believe that further reflection on the following issues is necessary:

First, we should be transparent and self-reflective when determining the units and especially the point of comparison, as this, in the words of Freiberger, also “determines the scale and scope of the comparison” (2019, 151). Even if one rejects thinking in terms of “scale” (see below), each comparative study should begin with a reflection on the way in which the *comparanda* and the *tertium* are conceptualized. Bergunder (2016, 39) stresses that we should see most of the “general terms in social sciences and history” which scholars use as points of comparison as the result of an entangled global history, which is why their historicization is an important aspect of a responsible comparative practice. In a newer article he suggests a Foucauldian genealogical perspective that understands the writing of history as a “function of the present” with the goal of formulating concrete “counterhistories” to prevailing historical narratives (Bergunder 2020, 67, 75). In this sense, we can understand the project of the BCDSS as making visible some of the blind spots in existing narratives of “slavery” and “freedom”. If, in proposing to speak of “asymmetrical dependency”, we do not only want to put forward an alternative analytical concept, but also to contribute to a historicization and critical investigation of how the distinction of slavery versus freedom became a fundamental element of Western identity formation (as argued in the cluster application [BCDSS 2021a, 1]), we need to trace both this distinction’s continued global usage today, and its history from our current moment back into the past. Only in doing so will we be able to reconstruct the conceptual history of the slavery-versus-freedom dichotomy as the result of global historical entanglements, and begin to demonstrate how counternarratives that move beyond this binary and take ‘asymmetrical dependency’ and the ‘continuum of dependency’ as their starting point can serve as a critique of existing research.

Second, instead of distinguishing only between synchronic and diachronic comparisons (BCDSS 2021a), we should reflect on additional schemata like the vocabulary of modes, scales, scopes, and operations (proposed by Freiberger) to describe and characterize our comparative projects in more detail. Only in making use of some of the elaborate typologies and reflections on the comparative method that have been developed in various humanities and social science disciplines over the last decades, can we establish a responsible as well as sophisticated practice of comparison that will allow us to convince our colleagues of the benefits of using ‘asymmetrical dependency’ as an alternative and key comparative concept. There are many additional resources and current debates across the disciplines that will help us to rethink this practice for the current moment (e.g. Haupt and Kocka 2009; van der Veer 2016; Deville, Guggenheim, and Hrdličková 2016; Candea 2019; Steinmetz 2019; Epple, Erhard, and Grave 2020; Groth 2020) and move towards a “decentering” (Davis 2011, 188–202) of comparison.

Third, as described in section I.2.3 above, the BCDSS has stressed a “micro-spatial approach” (DeVito and Gerritsen 2018b) to global history and a focus on “comparative microhistories” (Tomich and Zeuske 2008), which we have built upon in our practice-oriented approach to asymmetrical dependency developed above. In this context, entanglements in the sense of direct and indirect connections between comparands become particularly relevant (Epple 2012; De Vito 2019, 358). The units compared, e.g. two constellations in which we are studying occurrences of asymmetrical dependency, may exhibit existing connections among themselves (what Freiberger [2019, 144–148] calls “relations”). Some scholars even go as far as arguing that comparison should primarily follow such connections between *comparanda* and in this sense be an activity that prioritizes contextualization (De Vito 2019, 358). Paying attention to context in a micro-spatial perspective means recognizing that the relevant aspects might involve “multiple localities, individuals, objects and knowledges” (De Vito 2019, 361).

These challenges therefore point to questions of both the scope and the scale of comparison, as described by Freiburger. In regard to scope, this complicates the issue of whether the researcher “expects a relation between the comparands” (Freiberger 2019, 145), as the “unit of analysis” no longer coincides “with one single place, connection or individual, but with the whole of the networks created by their interactions” (De Vito 2019, 361). Nevertheless, microhistory is not limited to such “connected comparisons” (De Vito 2019, 362), but “can stimulate comparisons between pertinent contexts ... that are chronologically or spatially unconnected, but unified by common research questions (rather than by predefined models and taxonomies)” (De Vito 2019, 363). The critique of certain forms of abstraction apparent in De Vito’s formulation – of “predefined models and taxonomies” – originates from a critical view of macro-sociological analysis and comparison and implies a rejection of the notion of “scale” as a vertical ordering of the social (micro, meso, macro) that emerged from debates within radical geography (Marston, Jones, and Woodward 2005; Wissen and Naumann 2008). This approach called into question the usefulness of “scale”, with the result that newer proposals opt to treat it “as a social construction and an object of historical research”, rather than as an analytical tool (De Vito 2019, 348). Abandoning this notion seems to call into question the micro versus macro distinction and potentially the usefulness of transcultural comparisons that are not based on tracing “multiple exchanges” and “direct and indirect entanglements between the units that are being compared” (De Vito 2019, 358). However, even De Vito stresses that it is particularly “ontological conceptualizations of scale” (2019, 355) that are problematic and that methodological generalizations based on common research questions remain possible within a micro-spatial approach (De Vito 2019, 362).

While we cannot resolve these issues here or offer a comprehensive account of the relationship between comparison and scale (i.e. the value of distinguishing between micro, meso, and macro comparisons), it is maybe in regard to such theoretical questions that a micro-spatial approach, the praxeological perspective we outlined above, and a systems-theoretical understanding of dependency based on world society theory (Stichweh 2000; Stichweh 2020b; Stichweh, forthcoming) can fruitfully inform each other. Despite its reputation as a purely macro-sociological approach, a systems-theoretical perspective that focuses on the radical operativity of the social (Nassehi 2004; Nassehi 2014, 104–106)¹¹ and stresses the global interconnectedness of world society as the “one sociocultural space which includes all sociality and communication into the boundaries of a singular societal system” (Stichweh 2020b, 90) could productively be brought into conversation with an understanding of the social as elaborated by Schatzki as “a mass of linked practices and arrangements that is spread out across the globe” (2016, 32; see also 2010, 130). As to the compatibility of such an approach with a micro-spatial perspective which champions microhistory, but also proposes paying attention to spatiality to address the “multiple connections among places and

¹¹ Systems theory discusses structures – on all ‘scales’, if we want to use this notion – in regard to the improbability of communication (Luhmann 1981). The self-stabilization of communications into social systems and the emergence of societal structures cannot be explained by *a priori* defined societal domains or functions, but has to be understood as the result of continuous chains of communicative events (Nassehi 2001, 157–159). In this sense, the stability of societal structures is something that has to be explained, rather than treated as a pre-existing foundation of society. As the sedimented result of historical processes, structures continuously have to ‘prove’ themselves in the present (Nassehi 2004, 104). They exist only as series of communicative events that constantly re-stabilize themselves (Nassehi 2006, 252). On an “operational theory ... of order formation” see also Lindemann 2021, 77–229. In any case, thinking about ‘scale’ in the context of systems theory also has to take into account the distinction between the levels of interaction, organization, and society proposed by Luhmann 1982 (see also Heintz and Tyrell 2014; Kühl 2020).

temporalities” (De Vito and Gerritsen 2018a, 4) and to overcome the local versus global and micro versus macro divides, further theoretical reflections on how scholars of the BCDSS deal with the issue of ‘scale’ in regard to their various comparative projects are needed.

Fourth, the BCDSS’ transcultural comparative perspective on asymmetrical dependency also suggests that we think in more detail about the potential and the pitfalls of taxonomic and analogical comparison as a particular mode of comparative activity (see Freiberger 2019, 116–131). How are we to relate individual comparative concepts like asymmetrical dependency and agency to these modes? How can the various empirical projects at the BCDSS contribute to developing a “fully differentiated typology of asymmetrical dependencies” that results in the construction of a “new taxonomy” (BCDSS 2021a, 8, 5)? Following Freiberger, we could argue that this goal of classification can only be arrived at through taxonomic comparisons which produce and refine “metalinguistic categories” that allow for generalizations while being “subject to constant revision” (2019, 129). On the other hand, for a micro-spatial approach, De Vito claims that possible “procedures of generalization are essentially methodological”, focusing on “the way the context is selected and the problem addressed”, rather than the content of particular historical findings (2019, 262). Nevertheless, he argues that microhistory can address “large historical questions in highly contextualized studies” (De Vito 2019, 362), in particular through focusing on the ‘exceptional normal’ (Grendi 1977, 506–520; Medick 1992, 173–174). This raises the question of the relationship between and the relative importance of a) large quantities of comparative empirical data that can form the basis for the taxonomy of asymmetrical dependency that is to be developed at the BCDSS, and b) detailed microhistorical explorations of individual cases whose comparative value lies exactly in their status as representing the ‘exceptional normal’, and which thus illuminate ‘hidden’ structures not accessible through other sources (Medick 1992, 173–174, fn 17; see also BCDSS 201a, 10). If we reject “universal concepts and taxonomies of macroanalytical history” as oversimplifying historical processes (De Vito 2019, 362), can we develop alternative ways of achieving the stated taxonomical goal of the BCDSS? We might also ask if a comparison always has to be between two cases of social relations of asymmetrical dependency, or whether the generalizing impulse of the taxonomic mode also allows us to ask additional questions. We could explore what we can learn from a comparison e.g. between forms of agency in situations of asymmetrical dependency with situations in which we do not detect such asymmetrical dependencies.

Fifth, and finally: In what regards can comparisons result in what Freiberger (2019, 150) describes as a “redescription” of the comparands, and how can they serve as starting points for a “rectification” of our analytical categories and the further development of the theoretical framework of asymmetrical dependency as a useful heuristic for historical, social-scientific, and cultural studies? This process of “rectification” (Freiberger 2019, 158–160) is identified as one of the main goals of the BCDSS in the cluster application, which calls for a “reconceptualization and reformulation of analytical categories [in dependency studies] on the basis of broadened empirical evidence” (BCDSS 2021a, 4). Comparison is therefore central to the future of research at the BCDSS, as it is the only way to both refine and possibly confirm the hypotheses that “strong institutions of asymmetrical dependency” (BCDSS 2021a, 3) can be found cross-culturally as well as trans-historically, and that these structures are “formative” for the stability, durability, and continuity of (most) human social orders. Because of its importance, a more detailed theoretical and methodological exploration of comparison seems of great importance.

Possible research questions:

- *How does the project reflect on how the units being compared (comparanda) and the point of comparison (tertium comparationis) have been chosen?*
- *What “counternarratives” to existing understandings of slavery and other relations of dependency are made possible by the comparison(s) performed in the project?*
- *How does the project draw on recent debates about and systematic accounts of comparison in the field and discipline in which the project is located?*
- *How is the project dealing with the tension between micro and macro comparisons and current debates about comparison in global history? How does it relate to broader theoretical discussions about microhistory, praxeology, or systems-theoretical approaches?*
- *Does the project contribute to both a redescription of the compared phenomena and a rectification of important analytical categories, in particular the concept of asymmetrical dependency?*

III. Conclusion

We hope that the thoughts and arguments outlined in this paper will contribute to a more comprehensive, more nuanced understanding of the concept of asymmetrical dependency. While this understanding quite naturally starts from existing slavery studies (see state of research above), we purposefully avoided a narrow focus. Instead, we scrutinized the BCDSS’ preliminary definitions, hypotheses, and key concepts with a view to helping the development of an understanding of relations of asymmetrical dependency “beyond slavery”.

We did so by focusing on two main theoretical and methodological issues in research relevant to the emerging field of dependency studies: 1) an attempt at approaching asymmetrical dependency through concepts of critical theory, practice theory, and new materialism; and 2) an exploration of critiques and theoretical resources for furthering the comparative endeavor of the BCDSS. In both parts, we presented key points of different approaches while also trying to address central differences and some of the main controversies in the existing literature, in order to help researchers to locate their individual projects within the proposed theoretical frameworks.

Based on our understanding of asymmetrical dependency as an eminently relational phenomenon, we argued that social relations of asymmetrical dependency and the social orders that stabilize them have to be continually and actively shaped and are, therefore, to be understood as potentially unstable and transitory. Consequently, in section II.1 we pursued a primarily praxeological approach in order to identify and describe key dynamics of relations of asymmetrical dependency across time and space. Furthermore, we offered theoretical reflections on the question of which elements should be conceived as relevant components of social relations of asymmetrical dependency, and how these elements interrelate.

In II.2 we approached the difficult topic of comparison, which is of crucial importance for the BCDSS. In order to understand asymmetrical dependency, a comparative approach that goes beyond individual case studies is needed to facilitate the systematic and taxonomic aims of dependency studies. We therefore first discussed several critiques of comparison with a focus on the historicization of the *tertium comparationis*. We then outlined some theoretical models of comparison that can facilitate the linking of different historical and contemporary case

studies. Finally, we discussed some pertinent issues in regard to comparison in dependency studies.

It goes without saying that we left many questions unanswered and some even untouched. For example, we have not (explicitly) discussed the relevance of the adjective “strong” for the concept of asymmetrical dependency despite its central relevance in the two basic hypotheses of the BCDSS (BCDSS 2021a, 3). The inclusion of the qualifier “strong” currently carries a lot of weight for defining the scope of the phenomena the BCDSS is interested in. A lengthy discussion of the precise meaning of this notion (i.e. does it refer only to the duration or also the quality, stability, etc. of the relation?) is needed but has to be deferred to another paper. Another crucial point which is in need of broader discussion within the BCDSS is the (ultimately ethical and political) question of how to steer clear of an ontological understanding of (strong) asymmetrical dependency and, thus, make conceivable a future without or with differently structured relations of asymmetrical dependency.

These points notwithstanding, in its present state this concept paper addresses two crucial and important points for the field of dependency studies in some detail. We consider it a ‘living paper’ which will benefit from the knowledge and input of the scholars working on individual case studies and hope that even at this stage our considerations will serve to intensify theoretical discussion within the BCDSS.

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