

Call for Papers: Comparing real and imagined communities in the early modern period

Reflecting functional mechanisms, pragmatic purposes, and moral values of politically organised communities was at the heart of numerous early modern literary genres. Whereas the large corpus of political philosophy and theory might come to mind first, there emerged also more functional sorts of texts, e.g. in the fields of political administration or diplomacy, and a large number of detailed descriptions.

When it comes to delineating the characteristics and organisational structure of political communities in detail, two genres stand out in the early modern period: On the one hand, state descriptions explore contemporary political and administrative systems. Early examples include Lodovico Guicciardini's description of the Low Countries (1567) and William Camden's *Britannia* (1586), but also collections such as Pierre d'Avity's *Les principautez* (1613) or whole series such as the 'Elzevirian Republics' (1620s and 30s) and the 'Rengerische Staaten' (early 18th ct.). On the other hand, literary utopias design fictive communities as discursive counterparts. The most prominent example is certainly Thomas More's *Utopia*, which reflects on the contemporary socio-political circumstances in England and, by extension, in Europe in the 16th century. In its aftermath, a number of *aemulatores* flooded the literary market with their utopian state constructions, some of which were not only meant to be morally edifying treatises, but were also read as guidelines for the construction of a 'better world' (e.g. Kaspar Stiblin's *Commentariolus de Eudaemonensium Republica*, Johann Valentin Andreae's *Christianopolis* or Francis Bacon's *Nova Atlantis*). The Italian Dominican Tommaso Campanella (1568-1639) best exemplifies this intellectual trend of connecting the two genres in question: He published a description of the early modern Spanish empire (*Monarchia di Spagna*) as well as his utopian *Città del Sole* (Latin version: *Civitas Solis*, 1623). In the 17th and 18th century, utopian novels with increasingly sophisticated and multi-layered plot lines such as Jacob Bidermann's *Utopia* (1640), Samuel Gott's *Nova Solyma* (1648) or Ludvig Holberg's *Nicolai Klimii Iter Subterraneum* (1741) made a further contribution to the field by addressing contemporary political institutions and societal circumstances often in a satirically inverted form. Due to the fact that early modern utopias frequently operate with intricate narratives, exaggerations and distortions of the contemporary reality, they are often placed in a different discourse than state descriptions, which are rooted in a concrete historical and political reality and are often designed in a purely descriptive way.

Despite this predilection for a narrative design (in the case of utopias) vis-a-vis a descriptive presentation of the contents (in the case of state descriptions), these two genres share many common features: Significantly, they served as objects for systematic comparisons between political communities in various debates and contexts. Practices of comparing were widely used and reflected. For instance, Pierre d'Avity viewed the purpose of state descriptions in enabling readers to compare the state they live in to others and draw conclusions about the quality of their life conditions. During the political consolidation of the Dutch provinces, Hugo Grotius paid tribute to their constitutional system by holding it against the background of ancient states in his *Parallelon Rerumpublicarum*. In a similar manner, Francesco Sansovino incorporated the second book of More's *Utopia* in a series of real state descriptions in his *Del governo de i regni e delle republiche cosi antiche come moderne libri XVIII* (Venice, 1561). The Spanish bishop and judge Vasco de Quiroga evidently also read Thomas More's *Utopia* as a blueprint for an ideal society as he took this treatise as a model to organize the so-called *Republicas de los Indios*, i.e. 'hospital towns' which he set up in the Mexican region Michoacán to restore the societal order after a period of civil unrest. Quiroga's purpose was to imbue the indigenous population with Christian values and a pious lifestyle in imitation of More's Utopians.

In both genres, early modern state descriptions and utopias, the comparison as a conceptual method possesses a significant momentum for the formation of socio-political models and communities of practice. Points of reference for such comparisons can be situated in the present, the past or the future. Relating the contents of real or imagined state descriptions to a certain notion of temporality and historicity thus seems to be a further unifying characteristic of both genres. In doing so, several early modern authors either challenged the normativity of ancient and medieval predecessors or reinforced it by presenting them as models worthy of emulation.

In our conference, we would like to invite speakers from various disciplinary backgrounds to reflect on specific practices of comparing that are tangible in real and imagined state descriptions and other political communities as well as their relationship to debates and fields in which such comparisons were brought up as arguments (e.g. diplomacy, court settings, historiographical and colonial discourses). Contributions might address, but are not limited to, the following questions:

- How do different kinds of formal organisation of knowledge stimulate, induce, and influence certain types of comparisons?

- In what kind of debates did comparisons between political communities serve as arguments? How did such debates distinguish or equate ‘real’ and ‘imaginary’ models?
- In what ways did specific descriptions shape conditions and theoretical conceptions of comparing in early modern times?
- What aspects of the materiality of texts facilitated certain practices of comparing?
- How do comparisons between political communities interact with early modern evolutions in the field of history and political theory?
- In what ways were comparative approaches involved in practical political decisions and debates? How did they contribute to legitimizing or subverting attempts of nation-building?
- In which early modern genres do comparisons between real and imagined communities prevail and what was their intended target audience?

We are looking forward to receiving contributions from researchers from all pertinent fields of early modern studies. The conference will take place in spring 2026 (presumably in Münster). We plan on publishing the proceedings in a collected volume after the conference. The language of contributions and discussions is English. The deadline for submissions is February 15th 2025.

We are confident that the conference will be funded by external donors (travel expenses, accommodation). We are, however, unable to cover the costs of flights from overseas and ask participants from these countries to apply for appropriate funding.

Please send an abstract of your contribution (ca. 250 words) and a preliminary title to both organisers, Lukas Reddemann (lukas.reddemann@uni-muenster.de) and Katharina-Maria Schön (katharina-maria.schoen@univie.ac.at).