

The Benefit of Broad Horizons

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The Benefit of Broad Horizons

Intellectual and Institutional Preconditions
for a Global Social Science

Festschrift for Björn Wittrock
on the Occasion of his 65th Birthday

Edited by

Hans Joas
Barbro Klein



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On the cover: "Night Clouds" (*Nattmoln*). Oil painting by Prince Eugen, 1901. Photo by Tord Lund. With kind permission from the Thielska Gallery, Stockholm.



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COMPARISON WITHOUT HEGEMONY

SHELDON POLLOCK

I

That a Sanskritist should have the honor of being asked to contribute to the *Festschrift* of a distinguished sociologist has nothing to do with the Sanskritist in question and everything to do with the sociologist. In a way that is now virtually unthinkable in the American academy, where sociology has been both temporally and spatially flattened into the contemporary moment of the West—thanks to what Norbert Elias once called (without however explaining) social sciences’ “retreat into the present”—Björn Wittrock commands an astonishing knowledge about the world at large and an endless fascination with its historical development. This can be seen as an inheritance of the great European tradition of historical comparative sociology to which he belongs and that has, if not its origins, then at least its most enduring achievement in the work of Max Weber.

One aspect of Weber’s comparative project that I have found puzzling, however, is the absence of any theorization on his part of the comparative method itself, its historical ontology, its logic, even its purposes. At one point I was convinced that the problem was mine, not Weber’s, that I had simply failed to locate the grand methodological statement on comparativism only to be expected from the mind that had written so profoundly on the theory of the cultural and social sciences. But I found nothing in *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Wissenschaftslehre*, or in the various accounts of Weber’s method, which scarcely mentioned comparativism let alone revealed an explicit statement of his on the topic.¹

It turns out that, even though Weber’s later scholarly practice was not only fundamentally comparative but, in being so, a clear departure from

1 See Kalberg 1993, Ringer 1997.

his earlier work, he wrote not a word about it. Wolfgang Schluchter, one of the great Weber scholars of our time and an editor of the *Gesamtausgabe*, assured me that the fault lay not with me, and at the same time sought to provide the methodological gloss that Weber himself did not: "Indeed, you are looking in vain. There is no essay on the comparative method written by Weber. He practiced it, with the self-imposed qualification that only dilettantes compare (a famous statement in a letter to von Below written in 1914). He practiced it in order to identify the distinctive features of a phenomenon, not to explain it. For explanation, we need nomological knowledge, not only in sociology, but also in historiography."² Schluchter's judgment finds support in a recent study by Fritz Ringer, who goes a bit further but in a way that might puzzle us yet more: "In the major works of his later years, in his comparative sociology of the world religions and in the handbook that eventually came to be entitled *Economy and Society*, [Weber] moved away from the study of particular historical topics and toward systematic and comparative investigations of aggregate structures. Yet it would be wrong to suppose that as his emphasis changed, his methodology changed as well."³ How is it the case that something so fundamental to Weber's new mode of scholarship, and to exploring his new "emphasis"—the historical emergence of capitalism examined across cultures—did not require fundamental and new methodological reflection?

This unconcern with the theory of comparativism is not unique to Weber. I was privileged to collaborate with Björn Wittrock on several comparative historical projects, and in none do I recall any of the assembled scholars, myself included, raising questions about the nature of the comparisons we were engaged in drawing, about the potential risks (for risks there are, as we shall see) or about the particular varieties of knowledge (because there are indeed varieties) that we thought our comparisons were going to produce. Nor is this broad unconcern peculiar to European comparative historical sociology. For whereas other kinds of so-called harder comparative social science have turned methodological reflection into something of a subdiscipline (comparative politics offers a case in point),⁴ this has decidedly not been so in humanistic inquiry, particularly

2 W. Schluchter (personal communication); see n. 41 below.

3 Ringer 2002: 175.

4 See for example Stepan 2001; for intersections among the social sciences, Bowen 1999; for a recent general synthesis, Mahoney and Rueschemeyer 2003. Theoretical reflection is however prevalent in the American variety of comparative historical sociology, as in the much-cited essay of Skocpol and Somers 1980.

in the areas of interest to me: comparative intellectual history and comparative literature. The reasons for these differences seem not too hard to find. Take the case of comparative politics in the past several decades. Tainted by its connection with area studies and belittled by the formal modeling that invaded the field, it has needed to argue out its scientificity with as much vigor as it can muster. Comparative literature, by contrast, has a methodological commitment built right into its identity as a disciplinary form, given that making literature and making meaning are both inherently comparative activities. But perhaps for this very reason—in addition to the fact that comparison would appear to be the last thing people in comparative literature do these days—nobody bothers to think about it much, except to bemoan its supposed impossibility.⁵ As for comparative intellectual history, there are so few people who practice it that the absence of theoretical self-reflection is entirely unsurprising.

What is surprising, however, given the ubiquity of comparative thinking whether overt or latent in the human sciences, that there is not a single work we can turn to today for understanding the logic of systematic comparison (the practices and purposes), especially treated in a comparative way (across disciplines), or its historical ontology (“the coming into being of the very possibility of some objects”).⁶ I am certainly not going to attempt to provide any such account here; I have not the intelligence for such a task even if I had the space. Instead I offer some informal reflections, first on comparison as a scholarly method in intellectual history and literary studies, asking in particular what kind of knowledge comparison is meant to produce; and second, on the method’s pitfalls that have brought it increasingly into disrepute, where they come from, whether and if so how they may be avoided. I only wish the quality of these hurriedly assembled and somewhat desultory observations were more commensurate with the level of esteem in which I hold the scholar to whom they are offered as a token: *dósis d’ólígē te phílē te*.

II

What does it mean to do comparative history today, especially comparative history of the non-West, and especially the history of the early mod-

⁵ A special issue of *New Literary History* devoted to the problem of comparison (40, 3, 2009, which came to my attention too late to be digested for this article) suggests this may be changing.

⁶ Hacking 2002: 2. Kaelble 1999 offers something of the logic but ignores the historical ontology.

ern period?⁷ What distinguishes comparative-intellectual from global, connected, and other historiographies with multiple Ns? What relates the Ns in such historical studies, that is, what is the intended outcome of the multiplication of cases?

Asian historiography of the early modern period has sought, increasingly in the past decade or so, to move beyond the straightjackets of nation or culture area toward some larger frameworks for explaining human activity. One of those frameworks, world or global history, has been resurrected from its near death at the hands of microhistory a generation ago by the *samjivani* elixir of globalization itself. An uncommonly intelligent recent example of cross-regional history in Asian studies is Victor Lieberman's project on the "Eurasian Context of the Early Modern History of Mainland Southeast Asia." This sought to identify political, cultural, and economic transformations across Eurasia for the period 1400–1800 and where possible to identify linkages among them. The enterprise sometimes presents itself as an exercise in comparison, but it is actually a quest for global "commonalities" and "patterns"—what Lieberman calls "sustained trends toward political, cultural, and ... economic integration"—aimed toward establishing a reliable global periodization.⁸ (Similarly, in a recent and more overtly comparative history project examining the Roman and Chinese empires, comparison seeks "robust processes ... [for determining which] factors were crucial rather than incidental ... and how different contexts could produce similar outcomes, or vice versa.")⁹

In a second type of historiography with multiple Ns, "connected" (or "tangled") history, and "crossed" (and its subspecies, "transfer") history—the two are actually different if closely related, and both are usually differentiated from plain vanilla comparative history—the cases are not in fact thought of as analytically separate but rather as mutually constituted. And to a large degree the object of historical analysis is precisely this mutual constitution and web of connections; there is no comparison because there are not in fact two objects to compare but only a single process.¹⁰ In South Asian studies, connected history is directed toward recalibrat-

7 These questions have emerged for me from several comparative projects, including "Sanskrit Knowledge Systems on the Eve of Colonialism" (<http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pollock/sks/>), "New Directions in the Study of Early Modern Asia" (<http://www.princeton.edu/~piirs/projects/newdirection.html>), and Pollock 2010. Some of the following discussion is adapted from Pollock 2007.

8 Lieberman 1997: 452, 453, 459; see also 2003.

9 Scheidel 2009: 6.

10 Kocka 2003: 42, and more generally Werner and Zimmermann 2003.

ing the received cartographies deemed meaningful for capturing historical reality. Events occurring in disparate parts of the world are shown to have connections with each other from goods or persons moving through those regions.¹¹ But connected history is a method strictly limited by its objects and their interconnections.

Histoire croisée, which “associates social, cultural, and political formations, generally at the national level, that are assumed to bear relationships to one another,” and where “entities and objects of research are not merely considered in relation to one another but also through one another, in terms of relationships, interactions, and circulation” (like “transfer studies” with which it is closely associated), is far more process-oriented than connected history.¹² Self-proclaimed crossed history would appear to be largely restricted to Western European studies, but I have found myself inadvertently doing something like it for premodern Eurasia, in a study of ancient empires, where making an empire meant learning to *imitate* (in Gabriel Tarde’s sense) other imperial powers.¹³ Thus, there are sometimes ironic confusions about the boundaries between comparative history and connected and crossed history: sometimes what we thought was a comparison turns out to be a connection. And yet things that are connected can still, of course, be compared. Being imperial may be imitative action, but the models do not predetermine the applications in every detail, and what is not reproduced from the dominant model can be as consequential as what is.

Intellectual history proper is only fitfully recovering its confidence after decades of self-doubt in the face of defections to social and other forms of history. This is certainly true with respect to the theoretical challenges intellectual history presents when extended beyond the modern West, its almost exclusive field of operation to date, though non-Western intellectual history and its potential disruption of the emerging disciplinary paradigm remain almost invisible to contemporary Western reflection.¹⁴ Comparative intellectual history needs even more grounded justification for relating its objects than either connected or crossed history, for the latter strive only to account for the linkages that did exist among the cases, whereas the former is not predicated upon any necessary connections, crossings,

11 See e.g., Subrahmanyam 2005.

12 Werner and Zimmermann 2006: 31 and 38.

13 Pollock 2005, 2006.

14 For references see Pollock 2009: 534, from which some of the present discussion is adapted.

or conjunctures between or among the objects under comparison.¹⁵ Of course, the comparative intellectual historian is in principle not averse to finding such conjunctures. That Jesuit astronomers in Lisbon and Calcutta in the 1720s made planetary calculations that threw into doubt the traditional cosmology of the Hindu astronomer-king Sawai Jaisimh of Jaipur is worth knowing in a comparative historical account of early modern astronomy. But this kind of exogenous transformation of Indian ways of knowing, accelerating with the victory of colonialism and after, is not what comparative intellectual history is concerned to comprehend. Still less is it concerned with what is actually only a higher-order instance of what I have just described: understanding how differently intellectuals responded to *shared* stimuli—as might be done in a comparative study of the spread of nineteenth-century nationalism—since in India no shared conceptual stimuli took root prior to sustained European contact in the nineteenth century.

The Ns that constitute the objects of comparative intellectual history—to speak programmatically now—are forms of systematic thought that are found everywhere literate culture itself is found. It provisionally posits the importance of synchronicity among these Ns but should make no a priori claims that temporary synchronicity entails conceptual symmetry, that (to take the most difficult example) the modernity of the “early modern world” should everywhere look the same; in fact, asymmetries—different forms of modernity that are, in principle, possible—are as important and revealing as anything. How comparable forms of thought change in time, change differently, or do not change at all, and why they do or do not change, is precisely what this kind of historical inquiry seeks to understand. Clearly this approach has nothing to do with the sort of comparative history that “employs universal models, usually derived from European experience, as a grid on which to plot societies, and as such, can operate independently of chronology.”¹⁶ Not only should chronology be central to comparative intellectual-historical practice—which is not the same thing as comparative philosophy—but no given model of intellection can be held to be universal. Observing this limit, I argue below, is critical if comparativism is to be saved from itself.

It is vitally important, thus, that the synchronicity grounding comparative intellectual history contain *no necessary content* of this or any other

15 Pollock 2008: 533-542.

16 Lieberman 1997: 451 (citing Kären Wigen).

sort. This is the source of unease some have felt with the Axial hypothesis, which is concerned not just with synchronicity, but presupposes (or at least started out presupposing) a particular content. This was based on Karl Jaspers' vision of an "elaboration of cosmologies based on a separation of a transcendental from a mundane sphere and the codification of these cosmologies in textual form and their diffusion by intellectual elites" which (so the theory runs) manifested itself across Eurasia in the mid-first millennium BCE—and which later scholars then tried hard to find or if necessary to invent.¹⁷ We can make no assumption of unidirectional change and should not look for it; for early modern Eurasia we make no assumption of a uniform world system of intellectual modernity in which everyone participated, as we (or at least some) believe was the case with the world system of capitalism. Indeed, economic and intellectual history are not necessarily isomorphic; we might set out to write a history of early modern capitalism but it would be wrong-headed to set out to write a global history of "early modern thought" as if we knew in advance what that singular entity was, and as if the adjective "early modern" were not just a temporal but also a conceptual marker unproblematically translatable—like numbers—across the world's conceptual languages.

When comparing the intellectual histories of the early modern world, then, we are not attempting to validate a hypothesis over *N* cases. That is the goal of comparative history. Nor are we attempting to develop causal accounts of big structures and processes. This is the goal of comparative sociology (though this cannot always be separated from the preceding). The most effective comparative intellectual histories are going to seek to differentiate cases; they ignore generalization and aim toward capturing similarities and differences across a limited number of instances in order to understand the cases under discussion, to isolate from the incidental what is "crucial" and possibly, though less likely, what is "causal."¹⁸ There must, of course, also be a moment of "composition" for comparative intellectual history, though what this precisely entails remains perhaps our most serious challenge.

¹⁷ Wagner 2005. The Jaspers problematic was extended in Arnason and Wittrock 2004. My contribution there raises methodological cautions related to those offered here (Pollock 2004).

¹⁸ See Baldwin 2004: 11, from whom the above characterization is adapted. Agendas of historical comparative studies are of course historically situated. Comparative mythology and comparative philology today have different objects (structure vs. history, sets vs. processes, patterns vs. laws); in their origins their purpose was the same: to understand the unity of the Indo-European race.

III

How does the logic of comparison look in our second domain of study, comparative literature? As noted earlier, the discipline with the most pronounced methodological commitment to comparison seems to have done the least to conceptualize what it is. What one skilled comparatist wrote thirty years ago remains true: “Perhaps the least studied issue in comparative literature is what is meant by ‘comparative’ and, more precisely, what are the principles or canons of comparability.”¹⁹ I find no large assessments, accordingly, but only attempts to piece together the historical development. These recount how, as the disciplinary identity of comparative literature began to stabilize in the post-World War II period, a consensus emerged that “comparison was to engage in analysis of at least two national literary and linguistic traditions between which actual *rappports de faits*, i.e., factual relations or historical contact, could be demonstrated.” Within a few decades this consensus was supplemented and often supplanted by comparison based on “affinity,” what one scholar defined as “resemblances in style, structure, mood, or idea between two works which have no other connection.”²⁰

Comparison in literature continues to cultivate both these types. In a forthcoming anthology of world literature, for example, two classical dramas are juxtaposed, *Oedipus* and *Shakuntala*, to prompt either thematic analysis (“the guilty king who doesn’t know he’s the guilty one”) or formal analysis (“Greek unities versus Kalidasa’s much larger cast of characters and shifting scenes”), and two early modern dramatists of Japan and Europe, Chikamatsu and Molière, to recover symmetrical responses to the emergent world system of capitalism (with merchant heroes who embody “stalled upward-mobility narratives,” and characters who are “self-consciously metatheatrical, with characters announcing that they feel like actors in their unfamiliar situation and costumes”).²¹ A fascinating if disparate quest, then, in the one case for the kind of enduring ahistorical structures sought by, say, comparative mythology, in the other, for the “robust processes” of comparative history, as *rappports de faits* represent connected if not crossed history.

19 Miner 1987: 135.

20 See for example Yu 2006: 43-46 (quoting A.O. Aldridge).

21 D. Damrosch (personal communication; *Gateways to World Literature* is forthcoming from Longman). See also Damrosch 2008: 46-64.

Indeed, comparative literature offers not just this, but what is perhaps the richest set of comparative possibilities. Consider only the following first sketch of a possible typology:²²

- 1a. *Unconnective non-historical, or achronic, comparison*: two completely unrelated texts at completely different chronological times, though not necessarily at different “social” times (e.g., Homer’s *Iliad* and *Hōgen Monogatari* c. 1320);
- 1b. *Unconnective historical, or synchronic, comparison*: two unrelated texts at the same time (e.g., the short stories of James Joyce and Ichiyō Higuchi);
- 2a. *Connective achronic comparison*: two related texts at different times (e.g., Homer’s *Odyssey* and Joyce’s *Ulysses*);
- 2b. *Connective synchronic comparison*: two related texts at the same time (e.g., Joyce’s *Ulysses* and André Gide’s *La Symphonie pastorale*);
3. *Comparison that differentiates among multiple types of textual “relatedness”*: within a single linguistic tradition where one of the pair is known to the other (e.g., Homer and Euripides); within different linguistic traditions where one of the pair is known to the other (Homer and Joyce); within different linguistic traditions where neither of the pair is known to the other but who are related through some putative linkage (Homer and Vālmiki).²³

In addition to addressing individual works in these multiple ways, comparison can be directed toward not just texts but a variety of literary “things”: a verse form, a story motif, a literary genre; a social fact (e. g., patriarchy); a political event (e. g., revolution); modes of translation across time and space; large-scale literary processes such as the constitution of transregional literary publics in, say, seventeenth-century Europe and seventeenth-century India; the problem of vernacularization in India and Europe (and its absence in East Asia). And one can easily envision other kinds of comparison, of a metaliterary, or literary-cultural, or metacritical sort, all of which comparisons can themselves be divided according to the above typology (unconnective achronic, unconnective synchronic, connective achronic, and so on). For example:

1. Comparison of literary theories and their (universalist or other) claims and the “effective history” of those claims (e.g., Aristotle’s *Poetics* and

22 Some of these types were explored in a 2006 Columbia seminar co-taught with D. Damrosch.

23 Here again comparison recapitulates connection: aside from the possibility of an *Indogermanische Dichtersprache*, epic motifs undoubtedly circulated across the archaic world.

- Bharata's *Nāṭyaśāstra*; Wordsworth's "Preface" and Chinese literary theory);
2. Comparison of theory and practice in a given tradition (e.g., Walter Benjamin's translation theory and his translation of Baudelaire's *Fleurs du Mal*);
 3. Comparison of comparison itself as a mode of discourse: Kant's embedded and Hegel's disembedded comparativism, and the identification of comparative norms (see below); the comparison of comparativism (e.g., Herodotus and Hegel).

Each kind of comparison is entirely legitimate in the world of literary studies, and each produces a very different kind of knowledge. Some coincide with those mentioned for comparative history (producing new questions in N_1 ; validating a hypothesis over N cases; developing causal accounts of big structures and processes). Others supplement them with complex types of historical linkages—between Homer and *Högen*, say, or Homer and James Joyce—that point toward capacities unique to literature, now to identify the relationship of social form and expressive genre, now to generate a long tradition of reference. Still others serve to enrich the individual cases, by producing ever finer, more granular appreciations of their distinctiveness.

IV

I noted earlier that not only do we lack a logic of comparison for humanistic inquiry but we lack a historical ontology of the comparative method. At least I have never seen a history of the epistemology of comparativism as practiced that is itself comparative, let alone globally so. Were an historical ontology of comparison ever to be written, it would almost certainly have to be written about the West, and would need to take into account two key components of Western experience. The first is Christianity, which had built into it from its inception a comparative project with the earlier dispensation of the Jews. Indeed, some of our earliest scholarship in the comparative mode—the comparison of religions (or rather their *conformité*)—comes from the early-modern Christian world.²⁴

24 Ginzburg ms., a discussion of La Créquièrè's *Conformité des coutumes des Indiens Orientaux, avec celles des Juifs et des autres Peuples de l'Antiquité*. Herodotus compared Greeks and Persians, Aristotle the constitutions of Greek cities, Plutarch the lives of great men, but none thematized comparison as a form of knowledge.

The second component is colonialism, which has a relationship with comparativism that may signal causality no less than concomitance. If systematic comparative philology is a well-known and exquisite example, finding its origins at the very time and place of colonial contact, in late eighteenth-century Calcutta, we sometimes forget that nineteenth-century Europe is the high-water mark of historical-comparative studies across virtually all disciplines—ethnology, history, law, literature, mythology, religion. It is not news, but it also not inconsequential, that such projects were linked to the age of discovery and colonialism, and comparativism itself to the self-understanding of European supremacy.²⁵

In precolonial India, by contrast, comparativism seems to be virtually unknown. Eloquent negative evidence comes from the study of philology. Although vastly different Indian languages (and eventually European, such as Father Schwartz's German) jostled each other in places like Tanjore in the years 1600–1800, and the era was marked by the work of brilliant grammarians of individual languages and other philologists, no one ever sought to compare these languages in any way. This was not because comparing as such was unknown: comparison/analogy (*upamāna*) was an acknowledged (and increasingly important) form of valid cognition, and “weighing” things against each other (*tulanā*) and their relative difference (*tāratamya*) were widely used conceptual categories.²⁶ Indeed, the Indian thought world, with its infinite categorizations and distinctions of all reality, cared more about classifying than any culture in history. But if classification comprises comparison it is comparison of a particular sort, unconcerned with finding historical laws or positing ontological deficits.²⁷

A full-dress historical ontology would also show how and why there has recently arisen a widespread if vague sense that historical comparison is fundamentally problematic, both epistemologically and (in the

25 The first comparative histories of early modern Europe, such as Meiners' *Historische Vergleichung der Sitten ... des Mittelalters mit denen unsers Jahrhunderts* (1793), argued the superiority of the present to the past and other forms of not-now/not-us (see Kelley 2001: 5). It is no doubt tactless to note that the first systematic account of comparativism was produced by the East India Company employee John Stuart Mill (“Two Methods of Comparison,” 1843).

26 See also below n. 31. Apparently comparativist projects—the doxographies of medieval Sanskrit philosophy; the *Dabistān-i Mazāhib* (c. 1670), a text on religious differences (see Behl 2010), or the correspondence (*tavafuq*) between Persian and Sanskrit perceived by Ali Khan Arzu (d. 1756, Delhi)—aimed not at systematic elaboration, and compare less than juxtapose.

27 A study of comparison in the larger Islamic world (Ibn Khaldun and Al-Biruni, for example) would usefully complicate the global problematic.

largest sense) politically. For some intellectual historians, the very project seems incoherent: “Comparative history’ is either an oxymoron or a misnomer (as well as poor grammar). Either it proposes to compare the stories of different phenomena by assuming common elements and terms, in which case it is not history; or else it juxtaposes different phenomena described in their own terms and contexts, in which case it cannot venture significant comparisons.”²⁸ Literary comparatists find crippling deficiencies when we compare across cultures, as globalization prompts us to do, for comparison “is likely to generate a standard, or ideal type, of which the texts compared come to function as variants.” The only way out is to retreat to “a comparability based on specific intellectual norms or models—generic, thematic, historical,” that is, those developed within a single culture.²⁹ (I ignore for now the so-called postmodern critique that finds comparison per se to be meaningless—on the grounds that “post-modern epistemology holds it impossible to define adequately the elements to be contrasted or likened”—since I find that critique to be meaningless.)³⁰

I return to some of these important criticisms, but want to ask first whether or not a choice is even possible. Isn’t comparison something of a cognitive inevitability, making all intellectual history of necessity comparative intellectual history and all literary study comparative literary study? There is a complex philosophical grounding to this proposition, as well as a more accessible sociological one. I do not pretend to have a deep grasp of the former. But there are very suggestive hints in major European thought that comparison is fundamental to how we perceive the world.³¹

For Kant cognition as such seems to be a comparative activity. Here is how one recent commentator characterizes the theory: “To be acquainted with something is ‘to represent something in comparison with other things, both as to sameness and difference.’ [As Kant puts it,] ‘The logi-

28 Kelley 2001: 3. And yet as he goes on to show, comparativism has been practiced in historical studies in the West for three centuries.

29 Culler 2006: 92, who goes on to make the rather odd argument that “the more sophisticated one’s understanding of discourse, the harder it is to compare Western and non-Western texts, for each depends for its meaning and identity on its place within a discursive system.”

30 Cited in Kelley 2001: 17.

31 I must omit discussion of comparison and epistemology in Indian philosophy, though the question extends at least from Praśastapāda (fl. 530), for whom true awareness of a thing derives from its similarity/dissimilarity with other things (*sādharmyavaidharmyatattvajñāna*; a reference for which I thank Karin Preisandanz) to Bhoja (fl. 1050), who (for different reasons) grounds all valid means of cognition in comparison (*Śṛṅgāraprakāśa* chapter 25, called *sādharmyavaidharmyaprakāśa*).

cal *actus* of the understanding, through which concepts are generated as to their form, are: 1. *comparison* of representations among one another in relation to the unity of consciousness; 2. *reflection* as to how various representations can be conceived in one consciousness; and finally 3. *abstraction* of everything else in which the given representations differ.” As the author summarizes, “The most basic act of the understanding that is necessary for the generation of concepts is the act of comparison.”³²

Hegel analyzed the tacit comparison inherent in the construction of identity of any thing in the section on “Something and an Other” in the larger *Logic*. In Hegel’s own idiom: “Otherness thus appears as a determination alien to the determinate being thus characterised, or as the other outside the one determinate being; partly because a determinate being is determined as other only through being compared by a Third, and partly because it is only determined as other on account of the other which is outside it, but is not an other on its own account”; or in McTaggart’s pellucid rephrasing: “Each Something is dependent for its own nature on an Other ... the relation to an Other is what makes it what it is.”³³ And, at a rather different elevation of philosophical analysis, one might even say that Marx’s theory of the genesis of the commodity form presupposes a kind of comparativism: the difference between the two commodities is the prerequisite for an exchange—that is, comparison—between them to take place.³⁴

From these epistemological reflections on the fundamental character of comparison we turn to the phenomenological. The sociologist Rogers Brubaker has argued that comparison is intrinsic not only to social research and sociological analysis, “in all phases and at all levels,” but to much of lived social experience as well. Inequality, for example, is a social category that rests entirely on comparative grounds, and we can speak of a vernacular or folk comparative sociology that inhabits such everyday analyses (and that might usefully supplement or replace our own in given contexts). The reason to move “beyond *comparativism*” (the title of the paper) but not *comparison* is that, according to Brubaker, methods of comparison are simply heuristics, not warrants of the truth. They offer no epistemological guarantees in themselves; they are strategies rather than methods.

32 Okrent 2006: 100-101.

33 McTaggart 1910: 25-26. I owe the Hegel reference to Sudipta Kaviraj.

34 I learned much about both Kant and Marx from conversations with Rebecca Gould of Columbia University.

From a more expansive point of view, however—like that of Jerry Fodor, for whom the scientific method is basically “Try not to say anything false”—we can see that, if there is no particular method of comparativism we should follow to gain scientific truth, there are some we should shun to avoid scientific falsehood. One of these is allowing the comparisons inevitable in our thinking to remain occulted in our arguments, rather than explaining their relationship to our primary object of study and what role they are playing in its interpretation. Another defective method is related to the naturalization or reification of the unit of analysis or “methodological nationalism” (an imperfect, a priori, understanding of the case itself that is under analysis) but is even more critical—and can be fatal—to comparativism as such.³⁵

Comparison often comprises an unreflective moment of generalization based on the primary case. You cannot select out what is to serve as the second item in a comparison without having first identified family resemblances between the two instances. In order to compare empire A with empire B, say, you must first select out and generalize features of A before you are even able to identify B as a legitimate comparative partner (i.e., that both are empires in the relevant sense). That is, you must already and a priori have decided what constitutes an empire, though this decision is based on case A alone. In the very act of generalizing that case as the unit of analysis you are already suppressing, or potentially suppressing, elements of difference—elements that it is the whole purpose of comparison to capture—or interpreting them falsely as deviations from what is illegitimately posited as norm. Under ideal circumstances of self-awareness the process here can be treated simply as a variant of the hermeneutic circle: B takes on its particular meaning only in the context of ABCD, but that context itself only becomes meaningful if we already know what A, B, C, D individually and somehow independently mean. Like the hermeneutic circle, the comparative circle can be a virtuous one, as I will suggest. Having identified B as an empire (or “empire”) through generalization from A, we may then correct our generalization by probing differences between B and A.

More often than not, however, the ideal circumstances are not met and the virtuous circle becomes a vicious one when a particular is elevated into a “standard” (as the literary comparatists have noted). This flaw, along

³⁵ For “methodological nationalism” see Brubaker 2003: 4; Baldwin 2004. For additional problems of comparativism see Espagne 1994. For the quote see Fodor 2008: 4.

with occulted comparison, is ubiquitous in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European texts, when comparative thinking first becomes routinized. Consider again both Kant and Hegel. In Kant's "Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose" (1784) we are told:

If we start out from Greek history as that in which all other earlier or contemporary histories are preserved or at least authenticated, if we next trace the influence of the Greeks upon the shaping and mis-shaping of the body politic of Rome ... and follow down to our own times the influence of Rome upon the Barbarians who in turn destroyed it ... we shall discover a regular process of improvement in the political constitutions of our continent (which will probably legislate eventually for all other continents).³⁶

While only implicitly comparative (as with its Aristotelian review of political forms), the "Idea" is overtly committed to the dominance of one pole of the submerged comparative pair: "all other ... histories" are deficient in respect of Greek history, and "all other continents" in respect of the European political constitution.

A richer because more explicit example is Hegel's *Vorlesungen über die Aesthetik* (1823–29; published posthumously in 1835). The work as a whole is in fact a comparison of the five arts (painting, sculpture, architecture, music, literature) according to the degree to which they embody Geist. But the propriety and logic of the comparative method are again entirely unthematized, not only the cross-disciplinary comparison but, more awkwardly so, also the comparisons that operate within the discussion of each art, both across time and especially across space.

As an example consider Hegel's treatment of the epic. We can only compare epics when (as just noted) we have decided that some one thing is an "epic," and that other things can be considered epics as well by the fact of their sharing certain traits (or what we decide after the fact are relevant traits) with that some one thing. This procedure seems to be a cognitively necessary one. But the necessary gives way to the arbitrary when that some one thing, in this case Homer's works, becomes not just a type of a token but a norm:

After these preliminary observations we must now survey the particular requirements which can be deduced from the nature of the epic work of art. In this connection we are at once met by the difficulty that little can be said in general terms on this more detailed topic, and consequently we would have to enter upon historical ground at once and consider the national ep-

³⁶ Kant 1991: 52.

ics singly; but in view of the difference of periods and nations this procedure would give us little hope of producing corresponding results. Yet this difficulty can be removed if we pick out from the many epic bibles one in which we acquire a proof of what can be established as the true fundamental character of the epic proper [*was sich als den wahrhaften Grundcharakter des eigentlichen Epos feststellen läßt*]. This one consists of the Homeric poems.³⁷

What makes the “epic proper” the epic proper is its universality (the “universally human [*Allgemeinmenschliche*] [must be] firmly impressed at the same time on the particular nation described”).³⁸ But how the “universally human” is known to Hegel, and more, how it can be known a priori, before comparison begins, is never explained—because it cannot be.

In Hegel, comparison construes with a larger philosophy of history. If history is the unfolding of a single *Weltgeist*, if there is one world-historical process, not a plurality of independent processes, then, in the case of literature or philosophy or the state, the various epics or doctrines or polities cannot be equated with each other and so cannot be “compared” in the full sense of the word. Such comparison would only be “the night in which all cows are black”—that is, comparability is only a consequence of ignorance of historical developmental difference.³⁹ Overcoming such ignorance leads us not to comparison of equal instances but to the arrangement of unequal instances along a developmental arc, as stages of *Geist*’s realization: there is “the epic proper” and then a range of incomplete or failed instances, and comparison here is more the deductive ordering of what is known than an inductive search through what is unknown.

One can see how this conceptual orientation played out a century later—to return finally to Weber—in the account of the miracle of the West from the celebrated introduction to *The Protestant Ethic*:

Only in the West does “science” exist at a stage of development which we recognize to-day as “valid.” ... The Indian natural sciences, though well developed in observation, lacked the method of experiment ... The highly developed historical scholarship of China did not have the method of Thucydides ... All Indian political thought was lacking in a systematic method comparable to that of Aristotle. Not all the anticipations in India (School of Mimamsa) ... nor all the Indian and other books of law had the strictly systematic forms of thought, so essential to a rational jurisprudence, of the Roman law ...

37 Hegel 1970: 1051.

38 Hegel 1970: 1057-58.

39 Halbfass 1985.

And so on with respect to painting, printing, institutions of higher learning, officialdom, parliaments of elected representatives, “the State itself” with a rational written constitution.⁴⁰ All this is meant to illuminate the foundational question: how is it that only Western cultural phenomena—“as we like to think”—have achieved “universal significance and value”? And this is of course a fundamentally comparative question, and it prompts a vast chain of comparisons based on the assumption that one of the partners must be developmentally or inherently dominant. There can be only one valid science, one real rationality, one true historical method (which are quite different phenomena from the capitalism that is the subject of the book itself and that Weber theorized as *essentially* different from all other forms of “greed for gain”). The European varieties are not just a different species of a wider phenomenon but—comparatively speaking—a superior species, whose superiority is vindicated by their historical victory (Weber is uninterested in the possibility that colonialism may have produced this victory, to the degree it can be said to exist). What Weber sought from comparison was not deeper understanding of differences but identification of deficiencies.⁴¹

It is not a far step from this way of thinking to a very concrete and serious kind of domination that has been and still is underwritten by this form of comparison, namely modernization theory. In its core this is clearly a form of comparativism, mixed with a stadial or evolutionary vision of history. And in this conceptual world, all other societies “are defined and grasped only in terms of its relationship to the West, and only in terms of its place in a narrative defined in terms of the global history of the West ... against which all other histories will be measured.”⁴² Thus, you compare the societies of Africa or India or the Middle East to that of the U.S., find them deficient, and, not infrequently, attempt to transform them into the latter. Modernization hereby recapitulates nineteenth cen-

40 Weber 1958: 14-17. Parsons omitted the inverted quotes, which like the parenthetical remark that precedes (“wie wenigstens wir uns gern vorstellen”) render Weber’s argument somewhat incoherent.

41 As the letter to von Below makes clear: “I ... will treat the form of political associations comparatively and systematically, even risking incurring the anathema ‘Dilettantes compare.’ I think what is specifically characteristic of the medieval city—that is, what precisely history should present us with— ... can really be developed only through determining what was *lacking* in the other (ancient, Chinese, Islamic) cities. And thusly with everything. It is then the business of history to causally explain this specificity” (cited in Bendix 1946: 522; translation slightly modified, and emphasis added).

42 Mitchell 2003: 20.

ture comparativism and colonialism, with American foreign policy enforcing the dominant comparative partner—itself—on the rest of the world, in the certainty that its “model for national success: freedom, democracy, and free enterprise” is the “one sustainable” model.⁴³

* * *

The historical ontology and logic of comparativism are surprisingly understudied questions in the human sciences. Intellectual history and literary studies reveal a range of rich and complex varieties of comparative practices and forms of knowledge, often unfamiliar to other forms of comparison, that need to be carefully thought through. While failure to do that thinking—and to achieve a clearer sense of how precisely comparison has underwritten forms of historical domination from the earliest systematic comparative studies in the eighteenth century up to modernization theory in the late twentieth—has brought comparativism into disrepute in recent years, comparison as such seems unavoidable; it may even be something of a cognitive necessity.

But if comparison is necessary, the will to domination that sometimes seems built into the comparative method is certainly not. It is possible to produce comparison without hegemony across the human sciences. We begin to do this by making our inevitable but implicit comparisons explicit, explain what role they are playing in the interpretation of our primary object, and exercise sufficient reflexivity to avoid demanding symmetry when there is only synchronicity, turning difference into deficiency, or expanding particularity into paradigm.

⁴³ As the 2002 *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* put it. See also Tipps 1973: 219-220.

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