



Introduction

Our Impossible Method

Why and how do anthropologists compare? What are the distinctive problems they encounter in doing so and how might these be resolved? What if anything makes one comparison better than another? When if at all can anthropologists build on one another's comparisons to cumulative effect? Outsiders to the discipline might be puzzled to find that until recently, such questions would tend to elicit a shrug of the shoulders amongst anthropologists at best, at worst a sort of despondency. Indeed, while anthropologists had developed an extensive critical arsenal for describing the reasons why comparison should by rights be impossible, constructive proposals for how such problems might be overcome were thin on the ground. The practice of comparison itself never went away, of course, but in the main, discussions of comparative method and epistemology had for some time been mothballed, relegated to the doldrums of a 'naive positivism'. The final word seemed to lie with Evans-Pritchard's famous dictum, according to which the comparative method, anthropology's only method, was impossible.

Now, anthropological comparison is back in the limelight and it is the 'crisis of representation' itself which is beginning to feel thoroughly *passé*. A new wind of epistemological confidence is blowing through the discipline, and comparison is explicitly reclaimed and brandished as the

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distinctive anthropological method – indeed, as more than a method; as the epistemic, ethical and political heart and purpose of anthropology itself. Never since the 1950s has the discipline seen such an efflorescence of discussions of and proposals for comparison.¹ Most of these, however, are still scattered as contributions to debates within particular theoretical schools, or specific regional and thematic subfields. Furthermore, such discussions are often cast as unhelpfully stark dichotomies between the bright new comparatisms of tomorrow and the bad comparative method of old. The result of these new enthusiasms, superimposed on old concerns, themselves superimposed on older enthusiasms, is an impenetrable palimpsest – the anthropological conversation about comparison has descended into a cacophony. Some may claim that comparison is not impossible, but it is increasingly impossible to understand what that claim might mean.

This book is in two parts. The first maps the state of anthropological discussions of comparison and diagnoses the reasons for this double impossibility – the impossibility of doing comparison and the impossibility of keeping it clearly in view as a subject of methodological conversation. The second part seeks to reconstruct an archetypal account of anthropological comparison which can provide elements for resolving both kinds of impossibility.

This book is thus addressed, firstly, to social and cultural anthropologists. It outlines a solution to the impossibility of comparison which does not take the form of a methodological charter, or a path towards a unification of the discipline under the aegis of a single way of doing comparison. A fundamental feature of anthropology as presently constituted is the multiplicity of often incommensurable purposes to which we seek to put comparison: anthropologists use comparison to describe, to interpret, to categorise, to explain, to generalise, to critique descriptions, interpretations and typologies, to challenge explanations and unmake all generalisations, to evoke, to critique, to convince, to affect readers, to reflect and to create new concepts. Many of

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us define our vision of anthropology as fundamentally wedded to some of the aims above, and fundamentally opposed to some of the other aims above. That multiplicity is productive and characteristic of the discipline. But it follows that no single method, narrowly defined, can serve as a means to so many ends. And yet, in building our comparisons, we draw from a shared repertoire of moves and techniques which we combine and recombine in different ways and to different effect. At that methodological level, our comparisons remain shareable even when our aims are not. In that intersection of devices lies the key to the possibility of anthropological comparison, and the distinctive sense in which we are, still and despite our differences, a discipline. This book proposes a systematic account of that shared space of anthropological comparison.

In so doing, the book is addressed also to readers beyond the discipline, in the social sciences and humanities, and more broadly still. Whereas in a fairly obvious sense comparison is everywhere in other disciplines also, inherent in any kind of description, analysis or explanation, anthropology is distinctive in having made comparison its key defining feature. Elsewhere 'comparison' or 'comparative method' is often more narrowly defined, appearing as a particular rather than a constitutive concern (see, for instance, Detienne 2008; Yengoyan 2006a for the case of history). This difference in focus is the key to the potential value of this book for non-anthropologists. For while I will argue below that anthropologists have at times been insufficiently explicit in talking about the implications, entailments and limitations of their comparative moves, they have still been, in the main, more explicit than most. The fact that anthropology has built itself around comparison has led the discipline to produce, over the years, more versions and visions of the comparative method than any other discipline; anthropologists have borrowed, transformed and reimagined comparative devices from nearly everyone else, from the systematics of biology, to the concept creation of continental philosophy, from the quantitative persuasions of sociology or economics, to the interpretive visions of comparative

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history and literature or the various formalisms of linguistics. Just as often, anthropologists have imagined their own comparisons in explicit contrast to these and other external alternatives. If this wild profusion has made it difficult to obtain a clear view of what if anything anthropological comparison is, it simultaneously provides a kind of concentrated experiment in the multiplication of method. The discipline of anthropology has been a natural experiment of comparatism. Readers from other disciplines may find something of value in a systematic account of that profusion – both where their own familiar concerns are reflected in perhaps unusual forms, and where these are combined with strange ones drawn from elsewhere.

Too General, Too Specific

In fairness, the difficulty of keeping comparison in view as an object is not particular to anthropology. There is something inherently elusive to the notion itself. For what is comparison? The question initially seems to evoke two objects: one is general and the other specific. Upon closer examination, however, the two seem to blur irremediably and confusingly into one another.

I have stopped counting the books dedicated to anthropological comparison which open with the commonplace that comparison is a basic and universal human (or even animal) cognitive strategy, such that ‘thinking without comparison is unthinkable’ (Swanson 1971: 145).² A strikingly elegant definition of comparison in this general sense, by philosopher Condillac, is quite simply ‘double attention’: comparison is little more at heart than the act of giving one’s attention to two objects at once (Condillac 1795: 1.7; Goyet 2014: 162). In this sense, anthropologists compare all the time, as indeed does everyone else. There initially seems to be little more that one can usefully say about such a broad topic.

Secondly, however, anthropologists writing about comparison soon point to a particular method or set of methods, central to and distinctively

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employed in the discipline of anthropology. Here, on the other hand, there seems to be rather too much to say. For as soon as one looks for ‘the comparative method’ in anthropology, this dissolves through both internal pressures and external ones. External pressures: the ways of comparing which anthropologists claim as their own, also exist beyond the discipline (in sociology, history, biology, linguistics, literature, etc.), and in most cases long pre-dated the identification of anthropology as a distinct discipline. Internal pressures: the fact that whereas anthropologists do tend to agree in the abstract that their discipline is comparative, they have rarely reached agreement on any finite set of comparative methods, let alone any single comparative method, which might be characteristic or even mutually acceptable.³ Anthropological comparison splinters according to schools, periods, paradigms which seem irreconcilable in their purposes and assumptions.

However elaborate anthropological methods and discussions of comparison become, the lurking sense of a general cognitive operation underlying comparison keeps luring us into thinking that these distinctions are perhaps after all mere froth. Is not anthropological comparison ultimately just an elaboration of ‘double attention’? The very simplicity of this formula acts as a sort of acid, dissolving carefully elaborated distinctions between types and modes of comparison. We are led back towards broader understandings of comparison as a cognitive operation.

To an anthropologist, however, the generality of comparison remains after all quite specific. However ‘general’ one might seek to be about something like comparison, a moment’s examination brings us back to the fact that these generalities are themselves historically and culturally situated. Francis Goyet (2014), in his brilliantly concise genealogy of comparison, evokes the widespread rhetorical exercise of *comparatio*, at which cultivated Europeans sharpened their wits and tongues from Antiquity until at least the eighteenth century: putting x and y in parallel in order to draw out, carefully and usually at some length, their

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differences and similarities. We shall return to *comparatio* at some length in Chapter 4, but for now, I raise its spectre only to make clear that ‘comparison’ comes to us with a particular conceptual history, a gendered, classed, culturally marked history of European academic exercises and scholastic references, replete with ontological assumptions, metaphorical loads and evaluative connotations.

Not to put too fine a point on it, anthropologists might argue that comparison in this ‘general’ sense is quite specific not just in where it comes from, but consequently also in what it takes for granted and entails. Comparison, at its most ‘general’, already comes with implications of a world of things which are different and specific, from which cognitive operations elicit similarities and generalities. It sits neatly with assumptions of cognitive mastery, of a conceptual judge standing above and outside a world of things. In other words, the ‘general’ image of comparison fits quite neatly with a bundle of assumptions anthropologists have occasionally picked out as specifically ‘western’ (Strathern 2004) – although there is no reason to assume that they are exclusively so. A comparative account of non-western comparativisms is beyond the scope of this book, but forays into that topic (e.g. Humphrey 2016; Lloyd 1966, 2015) suggest that it would be self-regarding indeed to imagine that Euroamericans somehow have a monopoly on elaborate, explicit and formally grounded comparativism.

At the same time, an account of *anthropological* comparison cannot evade the shadow cast on our disciplinary visions of comparison by imperial western projects of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The early nineteenth century saw an efflorescence of comparative disciplines – comparative anatomy, comparative physiology, comparative grammar, geography or law. The thought that this move might be extended to a comparative science of human groups was underpinned in obvious ways by a colonial order of things in which human populations became available, both conceptually and practically, as objects of study (Asad 1973b). Comparison’s methodological problematics were entwined, from

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the start, with the political problematics of empire, as Ann Laura Stoler (2001) has shown. Once this ‘specific’ context of the ‘general’ meaning of comparison is seen, it cannot be unseen. Any attempt to shed historical specificities and cultural equivocations in view of a more abstract, formal definition can bracket but not erase these specificities.

This is why, for many anthropologists writing over the past forty years or so, comparison is not just equivocal but also deeply suspicious. And yet, it is unavoidable. After all, the very device through which anthropologists reveal comparison as particular (as western, for instance) is itself comparative. What is ‘western’ here but a comparative term? Thus, in the very move which reveals it as particular, comparison seems to become general again. And in turn, those generalities point to other particulars. In ‘provincialising’ (Chakrabarty 2007) western generalities, anthropologists find themselves part of a long genealogy of comparison as critical self-questioning, reaching at least as far back as Montaigne. In this vein, the discipline’s attachment to comparison can mark it out, not as the handmaiden of colonialism, but rather as a permanent thorn in the side of western pretensions (Geertz 1988). For some, such as Lloyd, comparison as self-critique indeed names a general ‘valence’ of comparatism *tout court* (Lloyd 2015: 30–31). And thus we are back with generality.

We seem to have reached an impasse. The specific meaning of comparison haunts attempts to generalise it. The general meaning shadows attempts to specify it.

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To this general slipperiness is added a further difficulty: the engrained mental habit, and scholarly convention, of taking things ‘with a pinch of salt’. This is another key to the paradoxical way in which comparison seems to be simultaneously impossibly complicated and wholly self-evident. Most anthropologists are more or less acutely aware of the heap

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of objections raised at some point or other against almost every aspect of anthropological comparison – from the problem of identifying units of comparison, to the possibility of commensuration, to the politics of comparative representation ... And yet – there's the paradox – we go on.

Thus we invoke cultural units, social groups or patterns of behaviour, while all the time implying that we are well aware these are just convenient fictions and that reality is far more complex. We analogise entities while mentioning in passing that of course they are also, in other ways, profoundly different, or contrast them while gesturing to the fact that in many other ways they fade into one another. Some of us appeal to philosophically abstruse techniques for challenging the very grounds of what counts as an object or a relation, all the while appealing to ethnographic particulars grounded in descriptions and generalisations of the most conventional kind. At every turn, an implicit or explicit appeal to taking things 'with a pinch of salt' keeps these contradictions out of view.

In one sense this is fine – such bracketing is unavoidable and productive. One core argument of this book is precisely in praise of bracketing. It is in part an argument for seeing comparisons as bundles of heuristics which get jobs done, an argument for recognising the value of our humble and unassuming comparative techniques, which churn away below the level of grand epistemological debates. These comparative moves, tricks and fixes bracket extensively, they make no guarantees to absolute truth or exhaustiveness, and yet they keep the discipline going, keep it together, and produce exciting new work. It would be impossible to do any kind of intellectual work – or to live any kind of life – without bracketing. The vision of complete explicitness is a mirage.

There is a world of difference, however, between bracketing something and just forgetting about it. Heuristics are valuable primarily because we know when they fail (Wimsatt 2007). Or to put the point otherwise, in the language of politics rather than engineering, it is fine to exclude, black-box and simplify *as long as we have a path back to and remain*

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responsible for what is being left out (Barad 2007). An analogous point has been made about habit (Latour 2012: 266): habit relies on *omitting* certain things, and in so doing, it makes the world inhabitable. Here would be no living, and no doing, without habit. But habit becomes a problem when it softly slides from omitting something to *forgetting* it. This closes off the possibility of living or doing otherwise.

Mostly, the approach in this book seeks to be constructive rather than critical, even at the risk of occasionally seeming rose-tinted. My aim is not to point to failings, but to open up possibilities. But if there is a critical argument at the heart of this book, it is that anthropologists have too often taken the impossibility of comparison for granted and just ‘got on with the job’, spraying caveats along the way, like a squid sprays ink – to ward off attackers. The resulting landscape is one in which we seem to be forever saying things we don’t quite mean, to others who don’t quite mean them either, but often in different ways or for different reasons. It is this habit of ‘taking things with a pinch of salt’ as much as anything else, which contributes to the sense that if we really thought about it, comparison would be impossible – so best not think about it too much.

A comparison comes to mind with the work of the behavioural ecologists I have studied over the past decade (see, for instance, Candea 2010b, 2013a, 2013b, 2018a). Behavioural ecologists tend to refer to the animals they study as individuals animated by particular purposes and strategies, by analogy to rational economic actors. Thus they might say that dominant female meerkats ‘choose’ whether to ‘invest resources’ in their children or in their grandchildren. A number of anthropologists have criticised this mapping of natural relations on economics, and the resultant naturalisation of economic assumptions (Sahlins 1976). When asked about this way of speaking, senior behavioural ecologists will patiently explain to the anthropologist outsider that this language is an ‘as if’, a way of translating in simple terms the theoretical hypotheses of sociobiology, and that they are not of course naive enough to believe that meerkats might actually be making such calculations. If anyone is

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naive, they archly point out, it is the anthropologists who could believe that serious scientists might be so taken in by their own metaphors – sociobiologists even coined a term, ‘the Sahlins fallacy’, to characterise such naive critiques (Segerstråle 2000). Of course, they point out, while speaking amongst themselves, they don’t need to qualify this shorthand – everybody knows what they mean.

And yet, some more junior researchers I spoke to were not so clear about where the ‘as if’ began and the putative description of actual animal perspectives ended. They had, of course, all learned the theoretical principles of sociobiology as undergraduates – clearly none of them believed that meerkats might be sitting around calculating genetic coefficients of relatedness. And yet, they felt that there might be a grain of literal truth to that way of speaking – after all, some of them pointed out, these meerkats really do seem pretty clearly selfish and calculating about their relationships with others. The point is not that these more junior scholars were naive or unscientific. The point is that the individualist economic language of sociobiology is not an outlandish and isolated heuristic. It chimes in neatly with many other assumptions Euroamericans might make about the behaviour of other beings. Not to mention the fact that sociobiological visions of animal life were popularised through animal documentaries from the 1980s onwards, feeding the obviousness of the metaphor back into an authoritative depiction of animal experience. In that context, keeping the heuristic of animals as rational maximisers sharply in view *as a heuristic* takes sustained and constant work, and the general assumption that ‘we know what we mean when we say ...’ is not conducive to that sort of work.

The situation is analogous in anthropology with respect to a number of aspects of comparative method. Take, for instance, the units of comparison we invoke – cultures, say, societies, groups, or indeed, as in my example here, disciplines such as anthropology and behavioural ecology. We too learn as undergraduates that such entities are convenient short-hands and fictions, and come to feel that when speaking amongst