COMPARISON IN ANTHROPOLOGY

Why and how do social and cultural anthropologists make comparisons? What problems do they encounter in doing so, and how might these be resolved? What, if anything, makes one comparison better than another? This book answers these questions by exploring the many ways in which, from the nineteenth century to the present day, comparative methods have been conceptualised and reinvented, praised and rejected, multiplied and unified. Anthropologists today use comparisons to describe and to explain, to generalise and to challenge generalisations, to critique and to create new concepts. In this multiplicity of often contradictory aims lie both the key challenge of anthropological comparison, and also its key strength. Matei Candea maps a path through that entangled conversation, providing a ground-up reassessment of the key conceptual issues at the heart of any form of anthropological comparison, whilst creating a bold charter for reconsidering the value of comparison in anthropology and beyond.

Matei Candea is a reader at the University of Cambridge and a former honorary editor of the Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute. He is the author of Corsican Fragments (2010), and editor of The Social after Gabriel Tarde: Debates and Assessments (2010) and Schools and Styles of Anthropological Theory (2018).
NEW DEPARTURES IN ANTHROPOLOGY

New Departures in Anthropology is a book series that focuses on emerging themes in social and cultural anthropology. With original perspectives and syntheses, authors introduce new areas of inquiry in anthropology, explore developments that cross disciplinary boundaries, and weigh in on current debates. Every book illustrates theoretical issues with ethnographic material drawn from current research or classic studies, as well as from literature, memoirs, and other genres of reportage. The aim of the series is to produce books that are accessible enough to be used by college students and instructors, but will also stimulate, provoke and inform anthropologists at all stages of their careers. Written clearly and concisely, books in the series are designed equally for advanced students and a broader range of readers, inside and outside academic anthropology, who want to be brought up to date on the most exciting developments in the discipline.

Series Editorial Board

Jonathan Spencer, University of Edinburgh
Michael Lambek, University of Toronto
Comparison in Anthropology

The Impossible Method

MATEI CANDEA

University of Cambridge
To Iris and to Alex, for the method and the madness
Contents

List of Figures page x
Preface: What We Know in our Elbows xi

Introduction 1
   Our Impossible Method 1
   Too General, Too Specific 4
   The Pinch of Salt 7
   A Roadmap to the Book 12
   A Negative-Space Ethnography 18

Part I  Impossibilities 27

1 The Impossible Method 29
   Introduction: On Seeing One Comparative Method 29
   Problems of Mapping 34
   Problems of Communication 40
   Problems of Purpose 47
   Conclusion: From Problems to Impossibility 52

2 The Garden of Forking Paths 53
   Introduction: On Seeing Two Comparative Methods 53
   Fork 1. The Comparative Method vs Naive Comparisons:
      The Birth of an Impossible Method 56
   Fork 2. The Historical Method vs the Comparative Method:
      A Boasian Crisis 72
## Contents

Fork 3. Comparison vs Description: Varieties of Functionalist Hope 78  
Fork 4. Topology vs Typology: Structuralist Alternatives 96  
Fork 5. The Frontal vs the Lateral: Interpretivism and its Heirs 119  
Conclusion: The Shadow of Two Forms 144  

3 Caesurism and Heuristics 148  
Introduction: On Seeing Many Comparative Methods 148  
Making a Break from Caesurism 149  
A Heuristic View 152  
The Normativity of Heuristics 155  
Caesurism as a Heuristic: Seeing Fractal Patterns in Theoretical Debates 163  
The Normativity of Caesurism 174  
Conclusion: How Far Have We Got? 181  

### Part II An Archetype 185  

4 Comparatio 187  
Why? 187  
Building an Archetype 191  
Conclusion: A Roadmap to Part II 197  

5 Two Ends of Lateral Comparison: Identity and Alterity 202  
Introduction: Different Ends 202  
The Argument by Analogy 206  
The Persistence of Caveated Generalisation 209  
Alterity 211  
Compare and Contrast 215  
Conclusion: Comparatio as Common Ground 220  
Coda: A Note on Diagrams 223  

6 Another Dimension of Lateral Comparison: Identity and Intensity 225  
Introduction: A Genealogy of Intensity 225  
Varieties of Intensity in Anthropological Comparison 229
## Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Pages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Two Ends of Frontal Comparison: Identity, Alterity, Reflexivity</td>
<td>242</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Introduction: 'Us and Them' not 'This and That'</td>
<td>242</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tylor's Ejections</td>
<td>251</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Persistence of Ejection: Interpretivism and Methodological Equation</td>
<td>256</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ejection and Satire</td>
<td>259</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Equivocation and Recursivity: Ejection Inside-Out</td>
<td>261</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Conclusion: Identity, Alterity, Reflexivity</td>
<td>266</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>The Oscillations of Frontal Comparison: Identity, Intensity, Reflexivity</td>
<td>270</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Introduction: Intense Critiques, Intense Responses</td>
<td>270</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>An Unstable Compound</td>
<td>274</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Frontal Comparison Stabilised: The West, Anthropology and the Rest</td>
<td>279</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>After Culture: Frontal Comparison Destabilised</td>
<td>286</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Not-Quite-Fictions: Frontal Comparison Refounded</td>
<td>291</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Oscillation and Rigour</td>
<td>310</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Frontal and the Lateral: A Constitutive Oscillation</td>
<td>313</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Conclusion: The Archetype of Comparison</td>
<td>319</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Rigour</td>
<td>325</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Introduction: The Rigour of Comparisons</td>
<td>325</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Rigour of the Anthropologist</td>
<td>327</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Rigour of the Discipline</td>
<td>331</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Rigour of the World</td>
<td>339</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>344</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Good Comparisons are Comparisons that Object</td>
<td>347</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Coda: Views from the Fence</td>
<td>353</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Notes</td>
<td>355</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>References</td>
<td>365</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Index</td>
<td>385</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Index</td>
<td>ix</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figures

1.1 Evans-Pritchard’s ‘experimental method’  
5.1 The argument by analogy  
5.2 Identity and alterity  
6.1 Identity and intensity  
6.2 Identity, alterity, intensity: the plane of lateral comparison  
7.1 Lateral and frontal comparison  
7.2 A space of comparison  
7.3 Frontal comparison between solipsism and telepathy  
7.4 Identity, alterity, reflexivity  
8.1 From evolutionist intensities to frontal binaries  
8.2 Mauss’s compound  
8.3 The double hinterland  
8.4 Frontal comparison after culture  
8.5 Fictions and not-quite-fictions  
8.6 Identity, intensity, reflexivity  
8.7 Three archetypes  
8.8 The archetype of comparison
Preface: What We Know in our Elbows

For 30 years at least, we have been able to fit together the pieces of a culture to make some sort of logical or psychological sense. But we still do not know how we do this, or what it means. Perhaps, as creatures that live in culture, we know in our elbows what sort of a thing a culture is, but have some fear of making this knowledge explicit. The problem is to make articulate and explicit the knowledge that we already possess in implicit form.

(Bateson 1967: 765)

This book started with a question: what is anthropological comparison today? This bears asking, because what Bateson writes about culture resonates also for comparison. We, anthropologists, all live in comparison, and we all know in our elbows what it is, but an explicit account of our conventions remains strangely elusive, for reasons which this book seeks to examine, and in part, to remedy.

Having asked this question, I tried to trace the answer back through the enormous amount which anthropologists have written about comparison since the inception of the discipline. This ethnographic foray into anthropology's own analytics, which is retraced in Part I of this book, left me with the sense that trying to tease out our comparative conventions was an unexpectedly radical project. For, indeed, a key feature of anthropological discussions of comparison has precisely been a recurrent focus on invention. Comparison is ever being reinvented, past visions abandoned, and new dawns glimpsed. The manifold problems
Preface

and limitations of comparative methods are, time and again, blamed on the imperfections of our forebears, whilst our gaze is fixed on the horizon, on what comparison might become. In that context, to ask about convention, to ask what it is that, as a matter of fact, we do – and have been doing all these years – is less banal than it might seem. It is a way of ‘staying with the trouble’ of comparison, to borrow a phrase from Donna Haraway (2016). And in that trouble, in the imperfection, cross-cutting limitations and conflicting requirements is also, this book argues, where the value of comparison lies. What these pages seek to offer is not the promise of a new method, the dawn of yet another new comparatism – rather it is a refreshed vision of the potential of what we already do.

This book has been many years in the writing and I have in the process accumulated many debts. My most direct have been to the generosity of those who have read and commented on the entire manuscript – Catherine Candea, Harri Englund, Paolo Heywood, James Laidlaw, Victor I. Stoichita, Marilyn Strathern and Tom Yarrow. I have also benefited hugely from the reactions and advice of readers who have commented on parts of the manuscript, or on one of the many versions of an earlier paper (Candea 2016a), the argument of which prefaces the one pursued in this book: Pierre Charbonnier, Alberto Corsín-Jiménez, Philippe Descola, Carlos Fausto, Simon Goldhill, Martin Holbraad, Caroline Humphrey, Geoffrey Lloyd, Morten Axel Pedersen, Gildas Salmon, Carlo Severi, Rupert Stasch, Pedro Stoichita and Victor A. Stoichita. Particular thanks go to the series editors, Michael Lambek and Jonathan Spencer, and to the anonymous reviewer for Cambridge University Press. The combination of generous advice, encouraging comments and bracing critiques from all of these readers has helped me avoid many pitfalls. For the remaining traps I have surely fallen into, they cannot be blamed.

For the more diffuse network of intellectual exchanges which have contributed to shape the arguments herein, it is impossible properly to account. However, I would like to thank colleagues at the Department of Social Anthropology in Cambridge and the Department
Preface

of Anthropology in Durham, and audiences at seminars in Cambridge, Durham, Aberdeen, the New School of Social Research, Copenhagen University, the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, as well as the participants and organisers of the 2015 Sawyer Seminar (The History of Cross-Cultural Comparatism: Modern Doubts and New Beginnings) at the Centre for Research in the Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences.

This book would not have seen the light of day without the European Research Council. An important initial impetus for writing it was the elaboration of a proposal for an ERC grant in which the question of comparative method loomed large. The actual award of the grant ‘Situating Free Speech: European Parrhesias in Comparative Perspective’ (grant agreement 683033) provided both the necessity and the time to follow up on the promise of working out the fundamentals of comparative method.

I am grateful to all at Cambridge University Press, and in particular to Andrew Winnard who prompted me to embark upon a book of this kind in the first place and then, together with Stephanie Taylor, brilliantly shepherded the manuscript through production. The text was immeasurably improved by the outstanding copy-editing of Carol Fellingham-Webb.

I owe a very particular kind of debt also, for reasons which will become clear in the introduction, to researchers associated with the Kalahari Meerkat Project and the Large Animal Research Group in Cambridge, who, for nearly a decade, have allowed me to hang out ethnographically in the close yet distant field of behavioural biology. Even though this book is not about that, it would not have been possible without them. Particular thanks go to Tim Clutton-Brock, Andrew Bateman, Alecia Carter and Dieter Lukas.

Finally, I want to thank Kat for tolerating the 5 p.m. lows and the 5 a.m. highs, and for being, for ten years and still, that incomparable person who, as Marguerite Yourcenar somewhere described, ‘leaves you divinely free, and yet requires you to be fully what you are’.

xiii