

## Conundrums of Comparison

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**A**BOUT FIVE YEARS AGO I proposed to my friend Benjamin Elman, the Princeton intellectual historian of late-imperial China, that we consider organizing a comparative project on China and India. This was not my first foray into comparative studies; I had actually done an earlier project with Ben on the comparative intellectual history of the early-modern world and had thought comparatively about India and Rome in the Classical period for a book on Sanskrit cosmopolitanism published a decade ago. Why I persist in such enterprises when, as you'll hear, comparison so befuddles me I can't fully explain. But now here I am again presenting ideas I am very uncertain of, some of them containing words I cannot even pronounce.

My befuddlement with comparison is primarily methodological and epistemological in nature. But I'm also befuddled by its stunted presence in our disciplinary discourses—the first of several conundrums I want to share here. This is palpably the case in comparative literature, which seems embarrassed and annoyed by the category baked into its academic identity. But the problem is not peculiar to that field. Actually the disquiet with comparison seems to be ubiquitous—

it's the crazy uncle in the attic you try not to talk about.<sup>1</sup> Much contemporary work attempting to theorize comparison shows this difficulty. The editor of an important collection published in the Comparative Studies in Society and History book series can claim no more for "the most critical aims of comparison" than "to make discoveries through different ways of seeing things." For a recent programmatic essay in *History and Theory*, comparison only produces "a unified argument about a more layered and nuanced colonialism [or whatever might be the object of study] occurring at many levels and in many places."<sup>2</sup> Many books of comparison explicitly, if curiously, eschew comparing altogether, forever deferring it until there is more, ever more, data (two new books comparing the Roman and Han empires are good examples).<sup>3</sup> In a recent book on comparative politics,<sup>4</sup> comparison as a method is nowhere discussed, not once, in the book's four hundred pages. Comparison for such political scientists, it seems, just goes without saying (if it goes at all, since "comparative politics" seems to be another way of saying "non-American").

And it goes without saying for many other scholars, including any number I have worked with. India specialists like me get invited to conferences all the time to complement the Middle East or East Asia specialists—whether dealing with the so-called Axial Age, or the twelfth-century renaissance, or "early modernity," or whatever. Comparison for the organizers has clearly been something to embrace, not fear, or I wouldn't be invited in the first place. But at none of these conferences, in my now decades-long experience, has the logic of comparison ever once been discussed as part of our enterprise. We just, well, complemented one another. If this weren't befuddlement enough, I am delivering this lecture at a series on "Comparison in a Post-Comparative World." I feel like an endangered salmon struggling upstream to spawn.

One reason for all these hesitations is, I assume, that the logic of comparison is seriously complex. The full force of its complexity was

brought home to me when the group of scholars to undertake our transhistorical and cross-disciplinary comparative study of China and India finally came together. One thing we wanted to explore was the historical preconditions for the present-day character of these two regions now reemerging as major powers in the world economy and international relations: We wanted to understand how the past—ecological and economic trends, gender relations, statecraft and political power, religious consciousness, historical imagination, scientific culture, literary and aesthetic understanding, artistic representation—has contributed to the constitution of the present. But above all we wanted to see what difference it makes to ask this question comparatively. To generalize grossly, the state today in China is strong and centripetal, whereas in India it is weak and centrifugal; in China, authority is centralized, in India it is dispersed; in China, soft power is deployed on a global scale (through, for example, the Confucius Institutes), in India, there is no agreement on even what such soft power might consist of (surely not Hindutva; yoga?), let alone whether it has a global destiny; Chinese make hardware for the world, Indians, software—among many other domains of divergence. We knew intuitively that to make sense of these phenomena—I bracket for the moment the question whether these are Herderian national characteristics, Orientalist flotsam, *idées reçues*, clichés, or something else altogether—direct comparison between China and India would be required, that is, comparison as far as possible *not* mediated by the West, but that intuition was one we didn't theorize very deeply. We did not discuss any other of the methodological and theoretical problems inherent in our curiosity, which would need to be worked out with some care—in fact, with more care than we realized or could immediately bring to bear.

To be sure, many scholars especially in the past few decades have sought to avoid systematic comparison, and I try to identify some reasons for this in what follows. But in addition to the problematic

character of such comparativism there has been a new impulse to capture processes of mutuality, where actual interactions of *case a* and *case b* produced exchanges, influences, and the like. Such “connective” (or entangled or crossed) history is offered as a corrective or even replacement for comparative study. But such an approach was one that by and large we consciously rejected. True enough, China and India interacted for millennia, in everything from religion to art to literature to science, not to speak of the more concrete exchanges of trade and diplomacy, so much so that to try to separate these phenomena is to tear apart a real historical fabric. What we were seeking to capture in our project, however, was not the emergence of a given form of life, its embryology so to speak, but rather the nature of that form when fully achieved, its physiology.

Our project was therefore most decidedly *not* to be a history of connections of the sort scholars have been producing for decades, which seems usually to be to search for origins, or an attempt to identify the more privileged lender and the more indebted borrower. Such histories are usually indifferent to whatever is specific, particular, or individual about China and India but are concerned only with what makes them similar because they shared certain phenomena through historical exchange. This unconcern with similarity is also the reason why we set our chronological endpoint at 1800, before the leveling processes of Western modernity were engaged and everyone everywhere started producing the same industrial capitalism, developing the same middle classes, writing the same national novels. What interested us, by contrast, were specific differences in phenomena. But again, we never asked ourselves, any more than the organizers of those earlier projects on the “Axial Age” and the like asked themselves, the key question: How precisely does comparison work, and, more important, what kind of new knowledge can comparison produce?

We were also surprised by how few of the remarkable scholars we assembled for our project had any clearer sense of what comparison

was supposed to do than we did. If it has proven difficult for almost all eight teams (each chapter is being written by one scholar working on China and one on India) to integrate their accounts (leaving them “accounts of phenomena that occurred in two places”), this was largely because most of us could not readily enunciate, or somehow felt uncomfortable enunciating, our comparative outcomes. Comparison was, to all appearances, a deeply alien practice.

### Comparativism as Epistemological Necessity

This alienness is another of my conundrums, something at once surprising and unsurprising.<sup>5</sup> It is surprising because comparison is something of a cognitive inevitability, a proposition for which there is a complex philosophical grounding. We don’t need the major figures in European thought to convince us that comparison is fundamental to how we perceive the world. But if we wanted to train some big guns on this problem we could cite Kant, for whom cognition as such is a comparative activity. “To be acquainted with something,” says a recent commentator, “is, as Kant puts it, ‘to represent something in comparison with other things, both as to sameness and difference.’ . . . The most basic act of the understanding that is necessary for the generation of concepts is the act of comparison.”<sup>6</sup> And then there is Hegel, who 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*. “Each Something is dependent for its own nature on an Other . . . the relation to an Other is what makes it what it is.” 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. And if we need a fourth horseman, we can invite Nietzsche. “What do people actually take knowledge to be? What do they want when

they want ‘knowledge?’” he asks in *The Gay Science*. “Nothing more than this: something unfamiliar is to be traced back to something familiar”—a tracing back that is, in essence, comparing.<sup>7</sup>

All this makes the various critiques of historical comparison very hard to understand. When one such critique invites us to “insist on the irreducible singularity and incommensurability of a culture, language, polity, or historical event,” it is unclear, at least to me, how we are grasp the singularity and incommensurability of case *x* unless we compare it with case *y*?<sup>8</sup> You cannot just “insist” on a thing’s singularity, you must show it, and you can only show it—indeed, you can only identify the “it” in the first place—by some sort of comparative juxtaposition, by excluding what a culture, a language, a polity, and so forth is *not* (a sort of *apoha* theory of comparison, as a Buddhist might call it).

From these epistemological reflections on the fundamental character of comparison we could turn to the more phenomenological. The sociologist Rogers Brubaker has argued that comparison is intrinsic not only to all 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 hence we can identify a kind of “vernacular” comparative sociology that inhabits such everyday analyses.<sup>9</sup>

### Comparativism and Its Sorrows

The comparative deficit of my colleagues is also unsurprising given the disrepute—not too strong a word—into which comparativism has fallen. Brubaker himself is a case in point. The title of the paper from which I quoted above is “Beyond *Comparativism*” (not *comparison*, my emphasis), where Brubaker wishes to move because methods of comparison, to the degree they can even be taken to exist “as a distinctive genre of research” (which he denies), are simply a heuristics, not war-

rants of the truth.<sup>10</sup> (You will see in what follows, by contrast, that I am here encouraging us to move beyond comparison to comparativism, beyond simply juxtaposing two cases to figuring out precisely what one is doing in juxtaposing them, how, and why.) But other, more compelling reasons for the disrepute of the comparative method can be and have been offered.

Although there exists, so far as I am aware, no historical ontology of comparativism—what makes it possible for the comparativism as method of systematic inquiry to come into being—let alone a global comparative history of comparativism, a case can be made for linking the method with forms of modern, or early modern, European power. It is not that no one compared things in earlier epochs—Herodotus compared Greeks and Persians, Aristotle Greek constitutions, and so on. But prior to European missionizing and colonial thinking no one had done comparison systematically and turned it into a kind of science. It is hardly accidental that in what has been posited as the first work on comparative religion, a Christian-European vision of innovation and progress in knowledge is contrasted with the antiquity and stagnation of the Orient.<sup>11</sup> A historical overview of this tendency has recently been offered by the historical sociologist George Steinmetz, who concludes that “[The] filiations between comparison and colonialism and racism have made it impossible to conduct cross-national or cross-civilizational research without conducting an initial genealogy of comparativism itself.”<sup>12</sup> Such a genealogy would in fact show that Steinmetz has foreshortened his narrative and that European comparativism, while more widely and systematically applied in the high noon of colonialism, was already in operation in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (Hugo Grotius, for example, meant to prove uniformity and commonality of human beings and hence the *naturalness* of natural law; here, comparison was employed to demonstrate universality).<sup>13</sup> Be that as it may, the genealogy Steinmetz demands is one that our

project certainly was unable to provide—and without which we proceeded.

What does, however, interest me about Western comparativism is not so much its place in a story of political power, but its place in a story of conceptual power. The most important part of this story for my purposes concerns what I propose thinking of as a variant of “methodological nationalism.” The social sciences have long been captured “by the apparent naturalness and givenness of a world divided into societies along the lines of nation-states,” by the tacit understanding that the (Western) nation—which is now the nation everywhere—is the natural social and political form of the modern world.<sup>14</sup> Analogously, in comparativism as such Western things—definitions, standards, norms, genres, and much else—have from the beginning been the default standards. In the “methodological nationalism” of normal comparativism, these comparata, or standards, are naturalized, most often even concealed, so that their relationship to the primary object of study, the comparandum, and the role they play in its interpretation are concealed as well.

A classic example of this is Hegel’s *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik* (Lectures on aesthetics). While the work as a whole is a comparison of the five arts (painting, sculpture, architecture, music, literature), and comparison operates within the discussion of each art, both across time and especially across space, the logic of the comparative method is never explained. Consider Hegel’s treatment of the epic. We can only compare epics when we have decided to identify some one thing as an “epic”; other things can be considered epics as well by reason of sharing certain traits (or what we decide after the fact are relevant traits) with that some one thing. This procedure seems to be a cognitive necessity. But the necessary gives way to the arbitrary when that some one thing becomes not just a token of a type but the type:

Little can be said in general terms on [the nature of the epic work of art] without . . . consider[ing] the national epics singly; but in view of the difference of periods and nations this procedure would give us little hope of producing corresponding results [*zusammenstimmende Resultate*]. Yet this difficulty can be removed if we pick out from the many epic bibles one in which the true fundamental character of the epic proper [*den wahrhaften Grundcharakter des eigentlichen Epos*] can be established. This one consists of the Homeric poems.

What makes the epic proper the “epic proper” is its universally human (*Allgemeinmenschliche*) character.<sup>15</sup> How this can be known, even known a priori, before comparison begins, is never explained—because it cannot be.<sup>16</sup>

### The Classical Indian Understanding of Comparison

Hegel’s methodological nationalism is really a subset of a deeper cultural normativity built into comparison. I hope you will bear with me while I try to show this on the basis of rather more exotic and unfamiliar material, from classical Indian logic, since I think it goes some way to help us realize that the inherent problem of the Hegelian method is not a Hegelian problem but foundational to precritical comparison as such.

Classical India has no method of systematic comparison, but it has a form of valid knowledge called *upamāna*, which is defined as “determining the thing-to-be-determined on the basis of properties shared with a thing that is already known.” The usual example is one of semantics. Someone, say a city dweller, who wants to know what a gaur is asks a forest dweller. When told “a gaur is like a cow”—that is, when informed of the similarity between something unknown and some-

thing known—the city dweller on perceiving an entity sharing known cow properties concludes that the *name* of the previously unknown entity is gaur; that is, he grasps a relationship between an entity and a linguistic sign.<sup>17</sup>

This perhaps unexpected definition of comparison seems to me to carry some useful insight. Comparison as usually practiced is indeed about moving from the known to the unknown, of mediating knowledge of the unknown by knowledge of the known (Nietzsche's argument). At the core of this mode of understanding, as Indian logic perceives, is the concern with assigning names. The word "epic," for example, is assigned to things (like the *Mahābhārata*) that share the properties of something you already know to be an epic (like the *Iliad*).

That this Indian insight gives us a little more purchase on things is shown when you choose to do comparison in places where there are no familiar "cows" at all, so to speak, but only unfamiliar gaurs; where you are comparing language worlds where "epic" does not exist at all but rather *itihāsa* (the-way-it-was) and *shi* (poem), not "state," but rather *rājya* (the-condition-of-being-king) and *guojia* (the-state-of-the-ruling-family). When you consciously put yourself in this situation, when you intentionally exclude mediation by the "national" comparatum, you are practicing what I would call methodological cosmopolitanism.

### Methodological Cosmopolitanism

In cosmopolitan comparison, you begin to cast doubt on the normativity—*den wahrhaften Grundcharakter*—of the comparatum, or standard, itself, even on its ontological unity, that is, what a cow or an epic or a state actually is, if it can be said to be any one thing. Dethroning the sovereignty of the standard, our certitude that it is the defining instance of a given thing like an epic, is important but not the most essential of lessons that non-Western comparison teaches for doing

comparison as such. One such lesson is the genuine problem of definition—if there are no cows to anchor our understanding of gaurs, how do we anchor it? I'll come back to this problem, yet another conundrum, in a moment. A second lesson is more straightforward: in cosmopolitan comparison the *difference* in our objects of study ceases at once to be seen as deviation or deficiency in respect to some standard (*den wahrhaften*)—where the Indian epic, for example, is no longer marked by what Hegel called “confusion, fantastic flabbiness and lack of real truth,” whereas the Chinese can have no access at all to the “highest class of epic” due to their “fundamentally prosaic outlook.”<sup>18</sup> Here, in a word, difference demands to be seen, well, *differently*.

Before I try to think through the challenges of methodological cosmopolitanism, let me address for a moment what from one angle may be considered another, more widely discussed conundrum of comparison—the almost inevitable totalization or essentialization of one's object of comparison<sup>19</sup>—but which from another is less about comparison as such than about the very character of our comparative units of analysis, in our case China and India. As I reflect on the origins of our project, and on our group discussions, the essentialized unitness of such geographical units was never raised as a concern by anyone. All participants clearly believed, without feeling compelled to say so, that larger units of life than the individual actor do exist and could be unproblematically studied. To be sure, these configurations of cultural, social, and political existence may now bear names in English—“region,” “area,” “civilization,” “nation,” indeed “China” and “India”—that we may wish to contest whenever they are (as they usually are) unhistorically reified. One might even argue that in the very selection of our cases, what I once denounced as “civilizationism”—indeed, a variant of methodological nationalism—is being smuggled in through the back door.<sup>20</sup> What, after all, is the reason for choosing for comparison this painting and that one if the one is not somehow marked as Chinese and the other Indian—and

to what do those descriptors “Chinese” and “Indian” in the end refer if not some civilization, or empire, or nation, or country, or area?

Well, yes, but. . . . For one thing, there is a reality to these larger configurations that we must not theorize out of existence: “China” and “India” are not mere confections of Chinese (or Indian) Civ 101. These are real conceptual spaces, however much and however obviously they have shifted over time in their boundedness (and not just shifted, but were riven by real internal division, indeed difference: just consider the north/south divergences in China and India in so many aspects of culture and power) resulting from real, long-term processes of representation, circulation, language, power, aesthetic taste, ideas of the divine, and so on.

For another thing, quite aside from our shared sensitivity to the historicity of collectivizing designations and our unconcern, usually, with essentialisms, none of the collaborators ever hesitated to affirm that our different pieces were pieces of some whole, that understanding any part—language or historiography or religion or ecology or whatever—required understanding it in relation to the other parts. Hence a third aspect of methodology needs to be mentioned.

Just as our cosmopolitan form of comparison rejects a sort of methodological nationalism—the tacit understanding that the Western nation and hence its social, political, and cultural forms are natural, and hence necessarily function as default comparata—so it refutes *methodological individualism*. It does this by impressing upon us the inevitability for analysis of larger social, political, and cultural collectivities—“China,” “India”—even while we strive to be sensitive to the very real reduction of complexity that these terms harbor.

### Cosmopolitan Comparison and Knowledge

Once we accept methodological cosmopolitanism, as off-center, or south-south, comparison requires us to do; once we actively reject

the default (Western) comparatum to gain as undistorted a view as possible of the (non-Western) comparandum, and try to do this across as wide a variety of objects of study as we can, what kinds of new knowledge do we actually produce? The full report will be available in a book now being finalized for publication.<sup>21</sup> I have space here to discuss three domains of knowledge only, and those very briefly: (1) comparison and conceptual categories; (2) comparison and disciplinary objects of study; (3) comparison and difference, the heart of the matter.

(1) It is hardly surprising that cosmopolitan comparison should explode received conceptual categories for understanding the world. But this happened so consistently, even insistently, in the course of the project, that it seems to have been something clearly intensified by comparison itself. A strong case is “religion.” Confusion about what is and is not religion in China and India can be widely observed among the first European travelers, most prominently the Jesuits in China. Comparative thinking of the monological sort was at work here, where the standard was completely occluded and so never questioned. The uncontested standard brought with it not just definition and classification but differentiation and separation, with considerable historical consequences in both worlds. Cosmopolitan comparison enables us to see especially clearly how the imported category produced such new totalities as “Confucianism” and “Hinduism,” and, what’s more important, promoted the misperception of much that historically was *never* differentiated and separated.

(2) It was equally predictable that the degree of uniformity or variation across the two regions that has emerged from the kind of big comparison engaged in here—comparison across very diverse disciplinary objects—should vary with the object, largely in relation to the degree of structure or agency that characterizes it. But again, it has proven particularly important to confirm this variation in two off-center sites. Structural determinants were at issue in producing com-

parable ecological consequences. Energy harvesting, for example, followed similar patterns in both regions. Both were low-energy-use societies, typically adapting to low-energy supplies rather than boosting efforts to increase them. But structures could obviously vary in the two regions and produce different outcomes. The introduction of American cultivars had disruptive ecological consequences in China and none in India (given tastes and patterns of consumption and the like). Varying cultural factors had ecological consequences too. India preserved most of its original animal population into the early modern era, including elephants. In China, most large animals became rare, with the elephant vanishing entirely.

(3) Less predictable or at least more powerful have been the new modes of mutual estrangement, so to call it, made possible by off-center comparison.<sup>22</sup> This is something that emerged from the reciprocal illumination of objects of analysis that can now be seen to be *equally different*, and neither deficient nor deviant; and, more important, often radically different the one from the other. Comparison unencumbered by delusions about the essential nature of things (what an epic or history or a nation really is) allows you to better capture the particularity, and peculiarity, of a given case. Better put: the true specificity of any given case emerges only against the backdrop of some other. One example will have to suffice.

When Steven Owen and I sat down to write our contribution on literature, we both instinctively chose a lyric poem to compare, partly because we are both interested in lyric poetry and partly because classical China and India were both interested in lyric poetry. Steve chose a poem by Du Fu entitled “Staying Over at White Sands Station.” Du Fu wrote it in February of 770, the first month of spring in the fifth year of the Dali Reign and the last year of his life, when he set out southward onto the vastness of Lake Dongting, heading for Changsha in modern Hu’nan in search of patrons. For a thousand years, every Du Fu poem has been read in the context of the author,

his life, and the larger historical world in which he lived—indeed, as part of the “Du Fu story,” biography set in motion by Du Fu himself.

I myself chose a poem entitled, well, nothing. Like all Sanskrit lyrics it is untitled because we are supposed to figure the narrative out for ourselves—indeed, that discovery is the whole point of the poem. We do not know who wrote the poem (it is assigned to “Amaru,” about whom we nothing, and who may have been simply an anthologist), or where, or when—and this was not because of some historiographical stupidity on the part of the poets. Sanskrit, the language of the gods, was prized precisely because it allowed literature to escape time and space and live forever. And the information is missing because none is necessary for understanding the poem the way traditional Indians understood “understanding.”

Whatever we might say about the symmetry of the two poems—the Sanskrit poet makes a common human situation, the errant lover’s remorse the simile by which to try to grasp the otherwise inexplicable actions of an omnipotent god; the Chinese poet crosses from “this world” to “that world,” from a journey in the empire, where name and reality are matched, into mythic space through reflection—more compelling are the differences in literary culture to which they point. In one, poetry could not be understood without a detailed historical apparatus, identifying the poet and when and where he wrote. In the other, poetry could not be understood *with* a historical apparatus; it was meant precisely to capture what was beyond time and place. And there are many other such polarities: in one culture, the same Chinese-character script was read everywhere the literary culture extended, but everywhere the language was spoken differently. In the other, the same language, Sanskrit, was spoken everywhere more or less similarly, but it was read everywhere in different scripts. In one, a single language—or script-language—dominated literary culture for more than two millennia; in the other, the dominant literary language began to cede its position after a millennium

or so to new regional languages, and finally new transregional languages (Persian, Hindi, English). In one, the unity of the language produced a unified literary culture; in the other, that unity, to the degree it exists, emerges out of a shared pool of narratives, motifs, allusions, and expressive techniques.

These features could not even have manifested themselves, certainly not so dramatically, unless they were brought into comparison. And they could not have emerged as pure differences, rather than deficiencies, unless they were compared off-center, with each other, and away from the usual, and normative, comparatum. Similarly startling differentiations confronted us everywhere, whether in traditions of statecraft, historiography, painting, or science.

### Conclusion

The China-India project began about five years ago, when very little good comparative work on China and India existed and almost none of it historical or cross-disciplinary. In the meantime (aside from a raft of volumes on Roman and Han empires) one book has appeared that I want briefly to notice, since it represents the polar opposite of what we are trying to do.

Peter van der Veer's *The Modern Spirit of Asia* makes three of the moves that we explicitly reject.<sup>23</sup> First, although the author repeatedly states that "comparative (historical) sociology" is the method of his book, the method is never explained. Second, the author eschews direct south-south comparison; he is concerned instead with their different reactions to the same stimulus, comparing "the interactions between India and Western modernity with the interactions between China and Western modernity."<sup>24</sup> In other words, the terms of the comparison are given in advance: there are cows, and we want to know how Indian and Chinese quasi cows (modernity

has made sure they are no longer gaur)s differ from them, not from each other. This results in a set of idiosyncratic deviations from a standard (secularism is a case in point). Third, it is the role of the international imperial norm in shaping modern China and India that interests him, not their own prehistories of modernity, which he considers largely irrelevant. Let me turn to this last point in particular.

Our group began a comparative study of China and India precisely in the hope of understanding how the past has contributed to the present, more particularly of learning whether we could identify historical preconditions of the two contemporary states. No straight line can be drawn from the past to the present, but what certainly seem like long-term habits or proclivities appear to have revealed themselves. We are as anxious as the next scholar to avoid teleological thinking or reinscribing Herderian “national characteristics” or Hegelian reductions (China is all state, India all society, and the like). At the same time it is clear, to us at least, that the present cannot be understood in its fullness without reference to that past.

Even if such continuities do exist, they have turned out to be less important to the project—at least to my thinking—than the outcome of comparison itself and the significance of the comparative method we have used. There is no escaping comparison; it is baked into our epistemic core. But we can compare better or worse. Better comparison, to my mind, requires exhuming the hidden standard against which we measure all things, bringing its illicit paradigmaticity to consciousness, or removing it from our awareness so far as we are able. This is the special attraction of methodological cosmopolitanism, where our subjects and standards of comparison are off-center altogether, providing us with the illumination of pure difference. Comparison is not about a taxonomical ordering of stuff, or a historical report of how Y came from X; or a connective account of how Y changed because of X, or some other operation of analysis. It is, for us China-

India collaborators at least, about showing how people create very different versions of things—lyric poetry, landscape painting, and the rest—that seem to share family resemblances.<sup>25</sup>

Some may hold that, while comparison is something we cannot not do, it may also be something we cannot in fact do—here is my last conundrum—insofar as in their view it does not produce any real knowledge beyond the comparison itself. But that may be both a necessary gain in knowledge and a sufficient one. For those not on the social science side of rule-mongering, the Geertzian-Blakian grain of sand—Du Fu’s or Amaru’s lyric poem (or the Balinese cockfight)—whose true quiddity manifests itself only in the “reciprocal relief” of comparison may be the only windows we can have onto the world; whether they give us a view to some higher order conceptualization is another matter. Perhaps there is no new surplus thing called “comparative knowledge,” nothing beyond ever-deeper understanding of the things themselves—the poems, the paintings (and the cockfights). The road of the quest may not take us to any end, but if we agree with Geertz that it must pass through “a terrifying complexity,” it is a complexity that comparison alone can illuminate.<sup>26</sup>

## Notes

The text of a lecture presented at the Center for the Humanities, Wesleyan University (2016; an earlier version was delivered as the 2015 Reinhardt Kuhn Memorial Lecture, Department of Comparative Literature, Brown University).

1. Raymond Grew, looking back over fifty years of the journal *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, noted how constant a challenge it was to make contributors understand that comparison was “something more than accounts of phenomena that occurred in two places.” Cited in Philippa Levine, “Is Comparative History Possible?” *History and Theory* 53 (2014): 331–47, at 345.

2. Aram A. Yengoyan, ed., *Modes of Comparison: Theory and Practice* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006), 4; Levine, “Is Comparative History Possible?,” 340.

3. One simply wishes to encourage the “more systematic and comparative thinking about the nature and development of imperial states” that the authors themselves couldn’t bother with; the other calls vaguely for “a future dialogue between the two fields.” See, respectively, Ian Morris and Walter Scheidel, eds., *The Dynamics of Ancient Empires: State Power from Assyria to Byzantium* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), vi; Fritz-Heiner Mutschler and Achim Mittag, eds., *Conceiving the Empire: China and Rome Compared* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), xvi. The core problem was perceived by Phiroze Vasunia, “The Comparative Study of Empires,” *Journal of Roman Studies* 101 (2011): 222–37, esp. 224.

4. Mark Lichbach, ed., *Comparative Politics: Rationality, Culture, and Structure* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

5. For further detail on a number of questions here, see my “Comparison without Hegemony,” in *The Benefit of Broad Horizons: Intellectual and Institutional Preconditions for a Global Social Science*, ed. Barbro Klein and Hans Joas (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 185–204.

6. Mark Okrent, "Acquaintance and Cognition," in *Aesthetics and Cognition in Kant's Critical Philosophy*, ed. Rebecca Kukla (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 100–101.
7. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, ed. Bernard Williams, trans. Josefine Nauckhoff (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 214. Related is Freud's conviction, in "On the Antithetical Meaning of Primal Words," that our "oldest and simple concepts" derive only from comparisons (citing the philologist Karl Abel: "Man . . . only learnt by degrees to separate the two sides of an antithesis and think of one without conscious comparison with the other" (Sigmund Freud, *Writings on Art and Literature* [Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997], 95). See also Claude Lévi-Strauss: "No civilization can define itself if it does not have at its disposal some other civilization for comparison" (quoted in Kamala Visweswaran, *Un/common Cultures: Racism and the Rearticulation of Cultural Difference* [Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010], 93).
8. George Steinmetz, "Comparative History and Its Critics," in *A Companion to Global Historical Thought*, ed. Prasenjit Duara, Viren Murthy, and Andrew Sartori (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2014), 417. Other critiques take other tacks; see, e.g., Donald R. Kelley, "Grounds for Comparison," *Storia della Storiografia* 39 (2001): 3–16; Michel Espagne, "Sur les limites du comparatisme en histoire culturelle," *Genèses* 1 (1994): 112–21.
9. Rogers Brubaker, "Beyond Comparativism," *Theory and Research in Comparative Social Analysis* (Department of Sociology, UCLA), 2003, <http://escholarship.org/uc/item/7t52j73w>.
10. *Ibid.*, 4.
11. La Créquinière, *Conformité des coutumes des Indiens Orientaux, avec celles des Juifs et des autres Peuples de l'Antiquité* (1704); see Carlo Ginzburg, "Provincializing the World," *Postcolonial Studies* 14, no. 2 (2011): 135–50.
12. Steinmetz, "Comparative History," 415.
13. "Comparing Comparativisms," manuscript, Centre for Research in the Arts, Social Sciences, and Humanities, University of Cambridge, 3. More intellectual-historical analysis is required, however, before "comparatism" as a systematic practice can be extended to Greek antiquity.
14. Andreas Wimmer and Nina Glick Schiller, "Methodological Nationalism and Beyond: Nation-State Building, Migration and the Social Sciences," *Global Networks* 2, no. 4 (2003): 301–34.

15. G. W. F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1970), 3:395–400 (*Hegel's Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, trans. M. Knox [Oxford, 1975], 1051–58). This discussion is adapted from Pollock, “Comparison without Hegemony,” 199–200. The pretzel logic of comparison is illustrated in a recent book on comparative empires. The editors specify criteria for empires, though these cannot be offered until we know what an “empire” is—that is, until you have already specified criteria. They proceeded to suggest these as directives for the contributors, then redefine empire on the basis of their findings, thereby attempting “to deduce a definition of imperium based on contributions that are based on a set *Kriterienkatalog*” that is itself founded in circular reasoning (Janneke de Jong, review of *Imperien und Reiche in der Weltgeschichte* [2014], *Bryn Mawr Classical Review* 2015.04.43).

16. I am of course hardly the first to see that the field upon which comparison has typically been played out has not been level. See, e.g., Pheng Cheah, “The Material World of Comparison,” in *Comparison: Theories, Approaches, Uses*, ed. Rita Felski and Susan Stanford Friedman (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013).

17. *Nyāyasūtra* 1.1.6, in *Nyāyadarśanam*, ed. Dvarikadas Sastri (Varanasi: Bauddha Bharati, 1984). This is the “old logic” view; later refinements are made, e.g., that *upamāna* is not a statement of similarity but a cognition of similarity, etc. (see, e.g., *Nyāyamañjarī* of Jayānta Bhaṭṭa, ed. K. S. Varadacharya [Mysore: Oriental Research Institute, 1969], 1:206).

18. “Verwirrung, phantastischen Unwahrheit und Zerflossenheit”; “Der prosaische Grundzug ihrer Anschauung” (Hegel, *Ästhetik*, 3:396; trans. Knox).

19. See, e.g., Jonathan Culler, *The Literary in Theory* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007), 264.

20. Sheldon Pollock, *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 525.

21. Benjamin Elman and Sheldon Pollock, eds., *China and India, Comparing the Past* (New York: Columbia University Press, in press).

22. For this aspect of comparative research, see Jürgen Kocka, “Comparison and Beyond,” *History and Theory* 42 (2003): 39–44, esp. 41.

23. Peter van der Veer, *The Modern Spirit of Asia: The Spiritual and the Secular in China and India* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014).

24. *Ibid.*, 4.

25. This, as I understand it, comes close to Bloch's distinction between *histoire comparative* and *histoire comparée*: we are not looking in our project for historical analogies between cases, but for historical differences, not for higher order lawlike regularities but for ever finer distinctions that illuminate the quiddity of things. See Marc Bloch, "Pour une histoire comparée des sociétés européennes," *Revue de Synthèse historique* 46 (1928): 15–50.

26. Clifford Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic, 1973), 54.