



FORUM

An Operation called comparison - Some critical observations

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It might perhaps be going too far to suggest that it is part of the human condition, but in our daily actions and observations we cannot help but compare and contrast. Walter Benjamin's funny observation is to the point: in winter we usually notice people who are thin; in contrast, in the summer it's fat individuals who attract our attention. If this is true, then that we can't help comparing and contrasting. The next questions for those concerned with intellectual and disciplinary matters is, of course: How qualified are our observations and conceptualizations? What exactly should be compared and contrasted? How explicit do comparisons have to be?

Comparisons go back a long time; Plato and his distinctions of different forms of rule and governments, for example, and Herodotus and Thucydides from classic history writing immediately come to mind, although there are many others. At the beginning of modern times, Montesquieu and Jonathan Swift made deeper inroads into the multiple uses and meanings of comparisons, to great effect. In his *Persian Letters* (1721), Montesquieu famously invented a *dramatis persona*, Usbek, who held up a mirror to what was supposed to be the more advanced society (France). Swift, in his distinctively satirist style, famously used Gulliver's travels (1726/1735) to imaginary places to show differences and similarities between peoples, tribes and nations. These early studies show that one could travel either horizontally in terms of space to identify differences or commonalities – as was the case of Montesquieu in his *Persian Letters* or the *Spirit of the Laws* (1748) and Swift's dystopian novel – or vertically in time, as Rousseau did after Montesquieu when he drew on the distinction between natural and civilized men in his *Discourse on the Origins and Basis of Inequality among Men* (1755).

Alexis de Tocqueville and Gustave de Beaumont wrote the first modern works of systematic comparison to which the attribute 'sociological' can be applied. Actually they almost qualify as a mini department of comparative sociology. Their comparisons move constantly between France, the US, the UK (in which they include Ireland), Switzerland and Germany. For better or worse, this included also the comparative analysis of colonial entities and relations such as India (in the case of the UK) and Algeria (in the case of France). In their analyses, Tocqueville and Beaumont tried to address the whole package: culture, religion, politics and social conditions. It is perhaps worth pointing out how Tocqueville saw his approach. He regarded *Democracy in America* (1835/1840) as part of a comparative study in the development of modern democracy rather than a study of America *per se*. The United States, having been the first modern democracy, simply provided the concrete background for such a study. In this context, it is also revealing that Tocqueville wrote the

book with a principally French and European audience in mind. (That he would later become one of the honorary intellectual American Founding Fathers is indeed an historic irony that in itself is worth a comparative study.)

As any reader of *Democracy* will note, the comparisons in it are often, though not exclusively, implicit. For example, when Tocqueville talks about the Sovereignty of the People, he has another contrasting model in mind; the Westminster model of the Sovereignty of the Parliament. On other occasions, his comparisons are explicit.

Tocqueville's companion Gustave de Beaumont, who wrote a less well-known book about Ireland, also used explicit and implicit comparisons contrasting English conditions with those in Ireland. Ireland, in turn, provides a further contrast with conditions in America. Ireland in the nineteenth century gave little reason for hope, in stark contrast to the U.S. In a way, *L'Irlande* (1839) can be read as the description of a darker side, omitted, oppressed or neglected in both *Democracy in America* and democracy in general. It is a model for comparing like with unlike, as opposed to like with like. Having said that, most of what was left out during the birth pangs of modern democracy was only hinted at in Beaumont's work; the differences have to be teased out by the attentive reader. For example, even if one only takes a brief look at the table of contents of *L'Irlande*, one finds that the Irish study is apparently structured after Tocqueville's *Democracy*. This was, of course, not accidental.

As many commentators have pointed out, Tocqueville and Beaumont's studies stood in the tradition of nineteenth century political economy. It is sometimes forgotten that Mill and Nassau Sr. were friends of Tocqueville and Beaumont. However, while Tocqueville's and Beaumont's approach also includes political economy, it is not limited to it. Their studies have become modern classics because their work also contained discussions and topics that clearly transcended political economy. Religion, long-term 'habits of the heart', civilization, language and other important cultural distinctions enriched their analyses. Some of that openness was later narrowed-down as political economy, becoming more 'scientific', utilitarian and rigid in its approach. In this sense, even Marx's critique of political economy is bifurcated in its analysis. Indeed, 'critique of political economy' does have a double meaning. It can mean, either, that one is critical, or a critic, of political economy and wants to criticize and perhaps replace it with a better approach, or that one stands firmly in that tradition of using political economy as a theoretical and conceptual tool, albeit perhaps not wholly uncritically.

Famously, the subtitle of *Das Kapital* (1867) was 'a critique of political economy'. Consequently one finds Marx constantly moving between the two viewpoints mentioned. Marx talks of 'capital', 'labour', 'labour power', 'surplus', 'production' etc.. At the same time, he attempts to look at what lurks behind those allegedly economic terms. By doing this, Marx moves with great ease around the globe, making comparisons and highlighting distinctions. Yet, in the end he becomes trapped in his own attempt to outwit political economy and trying to enlighten us about the hidden semantics of certain 'economic' terms. Logically, then, his comparison soon begins to serve only one cause – to define how modern capitalism has emerged and has conquered the world with everything else becoming subservient to that notion. The end product is a strange 'nostrification' process whereby the leading and most developed capitalist countries – in Marx's case first England later the U.S. – show their less developed and poorer relations their future. Countries and regions, even entire continents, are now inhabited by people without history whose only task is to function as predecessors to the capitalist regime. (Such systems thinking would later re-emerge in Wallerstein's world system theory, to no great intellectual benefit and distinction it must be said).

Comparison served an altogether different purpose for Weber and Durkheim. Max Weber was perhaps the first to point out that sociological concepts were almost designed to contain comparative and general elements. It was not by chance that, epistemologically speaking, Weber emerged out of the neo-Kantian tradition; there is no perceivable world and no meaning without concepts. Terms such as 'class', 'lifestyle', 'bureaucracy' or 'charisma' are abstractions (ideal types in Weber's language) and, precisely because of that very quality, help distinguish certain common characteristics and properties of observable phenomena from any other (*Economy and Society*, 1922). This attempt to make sense puts nomothetic sociology in opposition to other academic undertakings, particularly history which, at least in its origins, was more idiographic and attempted to explain singularities and single events (hence Ranke and hence historicism and the critique directed against them). In the course of the development of both disciplines, such extreme juxtaposition was later relativised, in some cases to great effect. Today, social and cultural history would be poorer without Weber's coinages and sophisticated conceptual reflections.

In the case of Durkheim and the Durkheimians (and most of social anthropology in its wake), we probably encounter the most productive use of the modern comparative method. For Durkheim, comparison helped identify 'social facts'. Over time his own use of the comparative method became more differentiated. One can clearly distinguish between Durkheim's early, and rather simplistic, use in *The Division of Labour in Society* (1893) and a later, much more sophisticated approach in the *Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912). In the early work, he contrasts the simple division of labour in primitive societies (and, as a consequence, a mechanic form of solidarity) with a modern society, which was based on a complex division of labour (and what Durkheim termed organic solidarity). In the later, he tried to master (mainly with the help of Marcel Mauss) an array of phenomena, resulting in a number of shorter 'thick descriptions' of cultures, tribes, groups and societies and their social practices.

It is interesting that Durkheim's comparisons are located on both horizontal and vertical axes, and that they are both applied to space and time. If one had to choose only one outstanding example of how successful Durkheim's comparative method worked, and how rich and insightful his conceptual coinage turned out to be, it would have to be the crucial distinction between 'sacred' and 'profane'. Durkheim moves back and forth in time and space to reveal deeper, multiple meanings of the sacred/profane distinction. Perhaps the most notable feature of Durkheim's method of comparison is that we come to know the deeper meaning of the word and its social and cultural notions and functions at the end of the study; we do not know it at the beginning. In this he differs considerably from Max Weber, who has been accused of a degree of conceptual imperialism; i.e. using concepts that are beyond space and time and so 'travel light' and can be applied to all times and circumstances but yet miss some crucial features because of their abstractness.

Not even the shortest meditation about what comparison in sociology or cultural history entails can be complete without mentioning a modern classic that, like no other study, has the advantage of permitting a look into the engine room of the social scientist who relies on comparisons: Levi-Strauss' *Tristes Tropiques* (1955). As is well known, Levi-Strauss's work would be unthinkable without Durkheim and the Durkheimians (even though Rousseau was his real hero). For our context, it is not important whether we regard Levi-Strauss' own structural anthropology as having been successful or having stood the test of time. What is important is that in *TT* Levi-Strauss raises some of the most pertinent questions about what it means when we study another culture or country. He points out the mediating and Jeremiad-type role that the social scientist, and in particular the social anthropologist, plays. Neither at home in their home country, which s/he often despises,



nor fully integrated in the culture they are studying, the social anthropologist is left in a precarious position which s/he constantly has to try to balance. Yet, as CLS stresses, it is exactly this tightrope walk, this constant oscillation between an insider and an outsider position, which will make other cultures and countries more intelligible. Levi-Strauss's critical insight into the discovery process is driven by genuine curiosity and the will and wish to know more about the other culture; the one the social anthropologist is not part of. In the end, Levi-Strauss succeeds because he makes an important contribution of how to avoid 'nostrification'; i.e. that those studied are treated and studied as if they were on the way to becoming more like 'us'. In the same vein, Clifford Geertz has stepped into Levi-Strauss' footsteps by asking whether our concepts can still remain unchanged despite a world that has radically changed. In the light of the changes we have [our generation has?] seen, from the fall of the Berlin Wall to the post-September 11 wars, can we still maintain that country and culture are the same and that culture and consensus are identical (*Available Light*, 2001)? This surely must have consequences for any future attempt at comparative analysis.

This short discussion throws up the ultimate question of whether comparison can be taught; can it be acquired in the classroom or in the seminar? Like any good analysis, comparative study worthy of the name will have to address what other sociological and historical studies do. In other words, it will have to address the famous What, How and Why questions: What exactly is happening? How is it happening? And why is it happening? But apart from that, comparative study must also show sensibilities towards differences in language, culture and custom. Famously, Marcel Mauss, one of the founders of the comparative approach, never travelled and has been denounced as an 'armchair social anthropologist'. But yet it is not necessary to have lived and conducted fieldwork with every tribe and nation to achieve intellectual distinction. The answer as to whether the comparative approach can be taught (and whether there even exists a method that can be called comparative) probably lies somewhere in between these two extremes. Let's start with the obvious. The operation called comparison would have a better name if some of its advocates and practitioners would speak at least a second or third language, perhaps with a passive knowledge of a few more. The same applies to academic disciplines; those who only know one probably don't even know that one very well. After all, as the short Benjamin remark that I mentioned in the beginning shows, comparison is the foundation of intelligence.

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