

HAUN SAUSSY

ARE WE  
COMPARING  
YET?

ON STANDARDS, JUSTICE,  
AND INCOMPARABILITY

BIELEFELD UNIVERSITY PRESS

Haun Saussy  
Are We Comparing Yet?

**BiUP General**

To René, Constantin, and Kirill, and to Olga, “sine qua non”

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**On Standards, Justice, and Incomparability**

**[transcript]**

**Bibliographic information published by the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek**

The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data are available in the Internet at <http://dnb.d-nb.de>



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**An Imprint of transcript Verlag**

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Cover layout: Maria Arndt, Bielefeld

Proofread by Mirjam Galley, Bielefeld

Printed by Majuskel Medienproduktion GmbH, Wetzlar

Print-ISBN 978-3-8376-4977-2

PDF-ISBN 978-3-8394-4977-6

<https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839449776>

## Contents

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The Problem .....	7
The Unique, the Comparative and the Competitive.....	9
Reckoning with the Other .....	19
The Family of Comparisons .....	29
The Elasticity of Substitution .....	39
Negative Privilege .....	47
Birds of a Feather .....	63
Noli me tangere .....	71
Near and Far .....	81
A Museum Without Walls for Walls Without a Museum .....	91
Making Room.....	99
Envoi .....	109
Acknowledgments .....	111



## The Problem

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What happens when we compare? We might say that comparison is an act of the mind whereby two (or more) judgments are combined and judged relatively to one another. Today it is cold, let us say three degrees above zero; yesterday it was cold too, perhaps three degrees below; yesterday, then, was *colder*. Before we can make that comparative judgment, certain means of comparison must be assured: a common theme (temperature); criteria, possibly involving instruments or records; categories, such as “minimum” and “days”; a way of articulating the two observations that will install a relation between them, for example that of “more” and “less.”

The things compared do not, I think, contain comparison in themselves (an apple is redder only in relation to another apple, and the relation must be perceived by someone or something); nonetheless, it would be wrong to say that comparison exists merely in the mind. Comparisons, when thought, expressed in speech or acted on in myriad ways, have effects in the world and among people; they can take the form of actions, even of events; they quickly call up responses of fear, desire, antagonism, pleasure, displeasure, and all the rest. These are my subject here. Leaving to the psychologists and philosophers the question of what comparison is, I would like to ask: what does it *do*? What (besides itself) does an act of comparison make happen?





## The Unique, the Comparative and the Competitive

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Comparisons, we hear, are never innocent: but once scrutinized for intent, can a comparison be classed as good, bad, or value-neutral?<sup>1</sup> Are there good or bad practices of comparing? What makes it risky? Through a chain of examples, none of them, of course, innocently summoned, but invoked for their potential to illuminate the consequences of comparing and not comparing, I would like to discover what tends to go wrong. I have (I blush to say) a normative idea of comparison, and I will chase it here through examples positive and negative. If the examples are adequate to the purpose, perhaps we can even determine whether the fault lies with comparing itself or with the situations wherein comparisons are made.

First, then, an example of non-comparison. The Byzantine chronicler Theophanes tells a story of brief, unfortunate political-religious reform in the year 528.

The king of the Huns in the area around the [Cimmerian] Bosphorus, Gordas by name, joined forces with the emperor [Justinian], became a Christian, and was baptized; and the emperor received him, loaded him up with many gifts, and sent him back to his own country, so that he might guard the Roman possessions and the city on the [Black Sea] Bosphorus. [...] So the king of the Huns, now a Christian, went back

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<sup>1</sup> For a wide-ranging set of discussions, see Rita Felski and Susan Stanford Friedman, eds., *Comparison: Theories, Approaches, Uses* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013).

to his own land and found his own brother and told him about the emperor's kindness and love of honor, and that he himself had become a Christian; and taking the statues that the Huns worshiped, he melted them down, for they were made of silver and electrum.<sup>2</sup> The Huns grew angry and conspired with the brother, and rising up they killed [Gordas], and then made the brother king under the name Mouageris. Then, fearing that the Romans would find them out, they went in stealth to the city of Bosphorus and killed the tribune Dalmatios and the generals.<sup>3</sup>

At this, the Romans sent out a stronger force and pacified the region for the time being.

This is but one short episode in a year-by-year listing of significant events in the history of the Eastern Roman (Byzantine) Empire. The Huns are one of many groups of outsiders who besiege the empire's borders. Within those borders, theological controversies often rage. A zealous critic of Emperors Leo III and Constantine V for their "shameless warring against the august, holy icons" (*ἀναιδέστερον κατὰ τῶν ἁγίων καὶ σεπτῶν εἰκόνων... πόλεμον*)<sup>4</sup>, Theophanes often registers with satisfaction the downfall of those who fail to honor images. Plagues, military defeats, and civil unrest are regularly connected with the failure of the bad emperors and their accomplices to give the icons proper reverence.

Given this overt endorsement of the power of icons on the narrator's part, it may seem surprising that the story of Gordas and the Hunnish idols is not presented as a cautionary tale or exotic parallel. It might seem to be a point in favor of the veneration of icons that this chieftain who failed to show any respect to the images of his people was eliminated, apparently without a dissenting voice, by supporters

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2 According to John Malalas, whose account Theophanes is summarizing here, the Hunnish gods were melted down into Byzantine coin. See Ioannes Malalas, *Chronographia*, ed. Ludwig Dindorf (Bonn: Weber, 1831), pp. 432, 646-47. The Cimmerian Bosphorus was located in present-day Crimea.

3 Theophanes [the Confessor], *Chronographia*, ed. Carl de Boor (2 vols., Leipzig: Teubner, 1883-85), pp. 175-76.

4 Theophanes, *Chronographia*, p. 405.

of the old-time religion. But Theophanes is not interested in making anything like that point. The murder of Gordas and his replacement by Mouageris simply show the reprobate nature of the Huns, who in the end meet with justified collective punishment. I cannot imagine that Theophanes would welcome the suggestion that the Hunnish iconoclast and the Byzantine iconomachs were examples of a more general category or pointed to the same lesson. His universe of comparisons is too narrow. Someone else might speculate that the destruction of icons, violating some compact between the people and their gods, always precipitates a kind of constitutional crisis, but for Theophanes there is apparently no such thing as images-in-general, no "always." There is no category in relation to which Orthodox images, Hunnish images, Buddhist images and so forth would be particular cases. Such a universalizing path is probably inconceivable for the chronicler because adducing the two instances of image as cases of a general law would amount to treating them identically, relativizing their differences, and that is simply unthinkable. There are on the one hand "the holy icons" and on the other those contemptible idols, and what happens in reference to one set is never the same as what happens with the other set.

A series of attitudes about image-worship can be extracted from Theophanes's chronicle. There are (1) those who give due reverence to the holy icons; there are (2) those who fail to revere them, some of them within the empire, like Leo X; there are (3) those opposed to all images, who trouble the empire from without (the Arabs); and finally there are (4) those who revere things that are not the holy icons (idolators). But these characterizations emerge piecemeal. No attempt is made in the chronicle to draw these categories together, to analyze them, to work out what relations of similarity or causality might obtain among them. Evidently, Theophanes's history is a history of the tribe. Its attachment to one set of images is non-negotiable, non-transferable. There is for it no point worth making about icons as a subset of images, or about Byzantium as one of a set of theological-political constitutions in which images play a leading role. We can say that his is a history that excludes comparison.

But to speak in this way is to assume that comparison was always possible, that for someone like Theophanes it would have been possible to draw the parallels between Hun and Byzantine. Is this assumption justified? Might it not be rather that we create criteria of similarity in the act of noticing Theophanes's myopia about images-in-general? If that is so, comparison is not inevitable, nor self-evident. It reposes on a set of conditions—conditions that were not met when Theophanes wrote the page just cited.

In describing Theophanes's worldview as narrow, bigoted, and thus closed to comparison, I may be only stating the obvious. Lest it appear that comparison is intrinsically open-minded and universalizing, and in order to reveal a certain other kind of need that comparative arguments can fulfill, consider a widely-circulated clip from Dan Murdoch's 2015 documentary film, "KKK: The Fight for White Supremacy." In it we see a father and son, both robed and hooded in the gear of the Loyal White Knights faction of the Klan. The father raises a hand and shouts, "White Power!" echoed by the four-year-old son: "White Paya!" Asked by the British interviewer why he dressed his little boy up in Klan clothes, the father, with no particular anger in his tone—only a bit of defensiveness, as if he were accounting for the choice to have his son play soccer rather than baseball in a town where most of the kids play baseball—explains, "I just want my kid to know that it's okay to be proud of who he is. And if being proud of his heritage makes him a racist, well, I'll teach him to be a racist, you know? [...] [The purpose is to help him] to go through what he has to go through to become who he needs to be in life."<sup>5</sup> The father's motive (his public rationalization, anyway) for inculcating in his son the view that (as he says) whites are "supreme" and "God's chosen people" takes the form of a comparison. "It's okay to be proud of who he is" echoes the language used by every advocacy group in the United States: if you are Asian, or Native American, or gay, or a Mensa member, or a cancer survivor, or a coal miner's daughter,

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5 Dan Murdoch, *KKK: The Fight for White Supremacy* (London: British Broadcasting Company, 2015). The brief episode here described was often linked to in my social media feed during the race agitations of 2018.

you have every right to be “proud of your heritage,” so why not extend the same permission to white people? To do otherwise, goes the argument, would be to impede the child’s natural growth into “who he needs to be in life.” Latinos, African Americans, Chinese, transsexuals, and so forth all have this wonderful thing called “Pride”—recognition of one’s group membership and the approval that goes with it; a yearly parade; the sympathy of the public. Why then is “Pride” denied to one group in particular? Suppose that in a certain town there are five high schools of equivalent size and reputation, each school having its team and mascot: the Panthers, the Leopards, the Eagles, and so on. Each team is followed around by a cheerleading squad (“Louder, Leopards!”), except for the Polar Bears, to whom this vital resource is denied. Who could fail to see the injustice done to the Polar Bears? Apparently implying just such a scenario, the Klansman presents himself as supporting a general principle of fairness. And given that fairness is a massively uncontroversial virtue in the United States (one never hears there the complaint that a court decision is “too fair,” only perhaps that it “doesn’t take into account particular circumstances”), he can then, having taken up position on that secure rock, advance to a more controversial label for his advocacy: if you dare call his attachment to fairness “racism,” well, he will accept the label, because in the context of the greater issue it no longer carries a negative implication for him. Washed in the pure waters of formal equivalence, “white power” becomes nothing more than a local form of the ambient self-esteem cult, translating into the terms of whiteness such affirmations as “girl power” or “each of us is special.”

The interviewer, chiefly concerned to document the existence of people like the Klan father and son, does not tarry with the semantics in play, though it would have been interesting to see how the Klan members gathering for a rally in the background would establish the grounds of equivalence whereupon whiteness, in the US, can be presented as just another identity. That is: an identity, and not a status dependent on the mass of interlocking institutions that sustain the ability of the white plurality to exclude or oppress others not so favored—exclusions and oppressions that, as it turns out, stimulated the rise of the identity movements that the Klan father finds so vexingly

envious. After all, monopolists too ask for nothing more than the right to participate in the free market—as monopolists of course. It is only by being phrased in comparative terms, and only by detaching those terms from historical or experiential content, that the slogan “white power” can aspire to be recognized as a demand for fair treatment. Since history is a tiresome, easily forgotten subject, and since other people’s perspectives are beside the point when it is a matter of “becoming who you need to be,” the operation is quickly performed, and for the Klan father and son perhaps definitively, since the whole point of being a Klansman is to avoid the company of people who would insist on parsing “white power” for its actual implications.

I surmise that this Klansman has also become aware of a creeping habit in American speech of preceding one’s opinion on whatever subject with a statement of community membership.<sup>6</sup> “As a Huguenot-American, I...” The shared identity takes the place of a demonstration of facts and reasons; it is, apparently, itself the facts and reason for one’s speech. Disturbing for grammarians but an even stronger proof of the gambit’s implied justificatory power is the construction which omits the “I think” or “I want to say that” clause: “As a trans person, the Chicago School District has committed a massive injustice in closing this school.” Left aside is the question, do all wearers of a label think alike? And is the opinion expressed meant to be persuasive to members of other communities as well, or is an assertion of community membership all that is required for the public use of reason? Whether the purpose be to shore up the speech (many stand with me) or to deflect possible criticism (my opinion being a facet of my identity, no one can take it away from me), the tangle of self-classification and self-justification must appeal to a felt interest of speakers. It also contributes to fragmenting the public space where open comparison, not to mention the debunking of nonsense, might happen.

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6 For a discussion of the “*azza* clause” as a tic that “signals the urgent insecurity of democratic culture and at the same time declares a temporary invulnerability and a goal-seeking purpose,” see David Simpson, *Situatedness, or, Why We Keep Saying Where We’re Coming From* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), pp. 41-47.

Theophanes's obtuseness and the Klansman's sophistry alike bring into view the question of the comparable. For the one, nothing is comparable (to the numinous icons); for the other, everything (every "identity") is. Both speakers reduce history to the history of the tribe, but the second one does so with an awareness of processes of rivalry and legitimation that eludes the former. (It may be that the Klansman longs to return to the splendid isolation of a Theophanes.) Theophanes implies that the genuine, legitimate, charisma-conferring MacGuffins are uniquely possessed by his tribe; as there is no comparison, there can be no question of being fair. The Klansman knows that he is living in a complex society with many competing beliefs, many identities seeking recognition, and his claim for special recognition is couched as comparison; he can get what he thinks of as his due only by putting forth the assertion that *others* have received a good that he deserves *no less than they*. He simply pretends not to understand the structure of the relevant universe of comparisons. However hypocritical and deceptive the Klansman's claim, it does at least aver that he is living in a society *regulated by comparisons*, a society in which it makes sense to appeal to fairness as a decisive standard.

Theophanes, for his part, was not living in a multiconfessional state where he would have had to face the question of dealing justly with fellow citizens who worshiped differently. His lack of concern for comparison in the matter of the Huns' idols corresponds to the unreceivability, for him, of a certain kind of claim about justice that has been noted by citizens of secular or multiethnic states. The chronicle of Theophanes ticks forward, year by year, recording events and naming them without needing to erase or replace any of the already given names. Its categories are fixed. The fit between data acquisition and classification is tight. The flexibility to modify categories is not required. A reader who does not share those categories, a reader for whom the difference between icons and idols is not unquestioned, appears as an unwanted annoyance.

Flexibility, however, is amply on show in the Klansman's sophism. The case of "white power" as identity politics seems to be a category mistake, a local malfunction of the comparative faculty—a wrong con-



clusion derived from faulty data (since we know that the status “white” has never in United States history been equivalent to, or interchangeable with, any other status). But it is doubtful that a logician-on-call could fix it.

In both cases a privileged example defeated the process of comparison. As a consequence, general questions of causality, value, and consistency—questions of judgment—were blocked. It seems then (reasoning *a negativo*) that a good comparison must not only be accurate, it must also be fair. The standards of both accuracy and fairness are hard to specify in advance, and hard to satisfy as well. In what follows I will examine a number of scenarios or situations of comparison, in order to ask such questions as: What are the conditions that make comparison possible, desirable, impossible, undesirable, obligatory, or fraught? What needs does comparison fulfill? Which is more challenging to explain, the ability to compare or the inability?

To “do justice” to a subject, as writers and researchers are supposed to do, is no mere figure of speech. In neither of the cases just cited can we say that justice was done. The difference between them can be expressed as that between obtuse and underhanded comparison. Obtuseness denies comparability, underhandedness denies the incommensurate (that is, the non-common denominators, or whatever makes examples unlike each other). In their contrary ways, non-comparison and the underhanded comparison fall short of a standard of good comparative practice. Although we usually say that the objects themselves can or cannot be compared, this is nonsense; the point is that the act of comparing, or of refusing to compare, raises our moral hackles. What is the forum within which we do so? When testing for epistemic injustice we must necessarily invoke a framework, a background, a horizon that establishes the sorts of properties that justice would need to have.

One such framework has long been nationality. The example from Theophanes shows how limiting that frame is. The Huns stood outside the Eastern Roman state as enemies or wavering clients; no one in Theophanes’s position would feel obliged to take their beliefs seriously. The sophisticated Klansman gestures vaguely at features of the liberal state as realized in US legal culture (“freedom of speech,” “freedom of associa-

tion," "equal protection," "pursuit of happiness") and his language shows some concern for public opinion as manifested in such a state (the appeal to the hearer: "you know?"). In citizenly fashion, he is presenting himself as a victim of the maldistribution of self-esteem and as in need of redress.<sup>7</sup>

In calling attention to the shortcomings of both the refusal to recognize comparability and the refusal to admit incomparability I, too, am appealing to some regulative instance, perhaps one that is imaginary or under construction: the "world community," the judgment of history, the assembly of rational beings. (Or, with infinitely more triviality though greater reality, my academic peers.) Whoever compares does so against the background of a claim of justice, one that sketches out a community as (potentially) capable of answering that demand. "Yes," that community might say, "we have reviewed the evidence and find the comparanda comparable, therefore we pronounce what you said of the first case also true (within limits) of the second case. Go then and perform the appropriate action: say a word, do a deed, join a side, enter into a right or a resource, as the analogy of cases may direct."

In societies made up of people who believe, act, speak and exist diversely, much is expected, then, from comparison. (A society without dissent could not be a liberal society. To think in such a society would mean, I suppose, to pile up perceptions in categories established by

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7 As Asad Haider observes (and not in defense of liberalism), "When you can claim to have been injured in some way on the basis of your identity, you can then make an appeal to the state for protection. [...] That's the basic way that liberal politics works. I rely on the insights of Judith Butler and Wendy Brown for this. It means that not only do people get more and more reduced to whatever identity category has constituted them as political, because they were injured on the basis of having that identity, it also takes away their agency as political actors. Because they become victims who need to be protected by the state." Daniel Denvir, "Mistaking Identity Politics: An Interview with Asad Haider" (posted August 14, 2018), available at <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/3972-mistaking-identity-politics-a-conversation-with-asad-haider-part-i> (accessed October 5, 2018). For a more fully referenced discussion of these points, see Haider, *Mistaken Identity: Race and Class in the Age of Trump* (London: Verso, 2018), pp. 10-11, 105-07.

consensus, continuing to register details but not modifying the framework—exactly the style of the chronicle, by the way.) Comparison is part of our daily moral life, a component of our on-board navigation system, one of many canaries we take down the mine. But can comparison do what is seemingly expected of it? Can it adjudicate claims, by discovering what is comparable and evaluating degrees of similarity? Does it reckon with dissimilars and incompatibles, finding for them a basis on which to associate and signify? Does it necessarily reduce, relativize, trivialize, and if so, is that necessarily a bad thing? Is it capable of finding out and defusing the sophistical abuses of its own logic? Does its reach extend universally, as it would have to do if it were to have this regulative function, or are there zones of exception in the generally consented texture of comparison?

## Reckoning with the Other

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The era known complementarily as the Age of Enlightenment identified the “cosmopolitan perspective” and gave it great moral authority. Discussions of the legitimacy of comparison among cultures often go back to this moment, interrogating it with a suspicion that sees in universalism a fig leaf for dominance.<sup>1</sup> But it is not all triumphant universalism: some documents from that era testify to the anxiety provoked by intercultural contact. Samuel Johnson, prefacing his great English *Dictionary* of 1754, wrote to defend the boundaries of English:

The great pest of speech is frequency of translation. No book was ever turned from one language into another, without imparting something of its native idiom; this is the most mischievous and comprehensive innovation; single words may enter by thousands, and the fabrick of the tongue continue the same, but new phraseology changes much at once; it alters not the single stones of the building, but the order of the columns. If an academy should be established for the cultivation of our stile [...] let them, instead of compiling grammars and dictionaries, endeavor, with all their influence, to stop the license of translators,

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1 Pheng Cheah, “The Material World of Comparison,” pp. 523-45 in Felski and Friedman, eds., *Comparison*, examines Locke, Rousseau, and Smith in this spirit. On comparative literature’s resort to the ambivalent term “cosmopolitanism” (connoting both universal empire and world peace) see Bruce Robbins, “What World History Does World Literature Need?” 194-206 in May Hawas, ed., *The Routledge Companion to World Literature and World History* (New York: Routledge, 2018).

whose idleness and ignorance, if it be suffered to proceed, will reduce us to babble a dialect of France.<sup>2</sup>

You might think that translating from French into English is a matter of finding the English equivalents of each French word or statement—a task made easier by the fact of centuries of steady interchange between England and France. But no: the English words you use will be subtly transformed in function and value by the French words they replace, and the next time you use those English words, they will carry some Frenchness into new English situations. Translation is, regrettably for Johnson, a two-way street. English is too close to French (and other languages) not to feel its distorting pressure. Is there, perhaps, no such thing as English, or does it exist only as a by-product of other languages? Johnson feels the ghostly interlinear foreignness of translated books as a narcissistic wound, a violation of the boundary of Englishness: a “pest of speech,” a bug, a parasite. Only a barrier or tariff against licentious translators can guard against the danger of Britons becoming subordinate to French linguistic mastery, the childish “babblers” of a mere “dialect” whose proper, classical form is found in Paris. Is Johnson’s protectionist stance not perhaps designed to conjure away the suspicion that English itself may be no more than a parasite embedded in a continental code?<sup>3</sup>

Edward Gibbon, writing in French in 1761 (and thus giving incidental proof that not everyone heeded Johnson’s directive), imagined the effects of translating and reading documents from the Iroquois.

An Iroquois work, even if it were full of absurdities, would be an invaluable treasure; it would offer an unique specimen of the workings of the human mind, when placed in circumstances which we have never experienced, and influenced by manners and religious opinions entirely contrary to our own. We should be sometimes astonished and in-

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2 Samuel Johnson, “Preface to the Dictionary” (1755), in E. L. McAdam, Jr., and George Milne, eds., *Johnson’s Dictionary: A Modern Selection* (New York: Pantheon, 1963), p. 27. Spelling conserved.

3 See Michel Serres, *Le parasite* (Paris: Grasset, 1980).

structed by the contrariety of ideas thus produced [...] We should there learn not only to own, but to feel the power of prejudices, not to be astonished at what seems most absurd, and often to distrust what seems best established.<sup>4</sup>

The man of the Enlightenment shows himself here fascinated by what is not like him. His response is divided. He preemptively characterizes the hypothetical Iroquois book as full of “absurdities,” as if to hold the foreign book at a distance: we are the ones who know what the truth is and the exotic informant is bound to be wrong about things. Well, probably the Iroquois gets some things wrong; we all do. But once past this easy assumption of epistemological superiority, Gibbon sets himself as reader a more demanding mission: to find the reasons behind the “absurdities” of the text. *Reddere rationem*: it is a philosophical mission, to understand “the workings of the human mind” in an unfamiliar context. Gibbon does not promise to explain the Iroquois mentality in terms of our own mentality, but to discover, so far as possible, the coherence, system, and implications of the alien mind. It is not our reasons that count as Reason here. By performing this act of interpretation, Gibbon advances, we will come to understand ourselves as “prejudiced” subjects, to stand apart from our previous categories, and “to distrust what seems best established” among people like ourselves.

This is what happens when we read texts composed under “circumstances which we have never experienced.” The texts puncture our existing world with seeming nonsense, just as the bastardized English of translators violated, in Johnson’s view, the unity of the linguistic colonnade. Both kinds of disturbance offend against intellectual and cultural narcissism, dispelling the illusion that we (or our culture) can account for everything. What is the “Iroquois work”? Is it literature? Is it myth? Is it the muttering of an insane person? Do we have a category for it? Having a category would tell us what to do with it, how to comport ourselves in reference to it, but that is exactly what is missing. Must we, or

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4 Edward Gibbon, “An Essay on the Study of Literature” (1761), cited in Reiss, 136-37. For the original, see Edward Gibbon, *Essai sur l'étude de la littérature* (London: Becket & de Hondt, 1761), pp. 90-91.

can we, adopt the document's own categories for what it does, what it contains, what it means, and what gods watch over the process?

Comparison as used by historians, anthropologists, literary scholars, political scientists and other specialized professionals enacts processes at work on a daily basis in language and culture: for example, the loan word and the category failure. The encounter with foreign texts, the lack of a conceptual scheme in which to class the new phenomenon, force the observer to turn from the thing observed to the means of observation. All equivalence, translation and analogy assume some basis of comparison as known. An everyday comparison holds constant its starting terms, its "prejudices" Gibbon would say. Having heard a thousand origin-myths, I easily recognize a new member of the set by its resemblance to the previous examples. But if I then encounter an aberrant example, one where the gods do not behave like the gods in the myths I know or the narrative links among events are inexplicable to me, I will have to turn back on my categories and think about how they are constituted. For that sort of operation, inventorying will be insufficient. Reflexive comparison, as I would like to call this variety of thinking, renegotiates its own logic as part of the act of comparing; it reconceives the known in terms of the unknown (forcing us "to own [...] the power of prejudices") rather than the more usual inverse. It is, as Kant said of a similar case, a "power of judgment, which has no concept ready for the given intuition."<sup>5</sup> "The reflecting power of judgment thus proceeds with given appearances, in order to bring them under empirical concepts of determinate natural things, not schematically, but technically, not as it were merely mechanically, like an instrument, but artistically, in accordance with [a] general but at the same time indeterminate principle."<sup>6</sup>

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5 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), "First Introduction," section viii, p. 26; Kant, "Erste Fassung der Einleitung in die *Kritik der Urteilskraft*," in *Werke*, ed. Wilhelm Weischedel (6 vols., Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1983), 5: 201.

6 Kant, trans. Guyer and Matthews, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, p. 17; Kant, *Werke*, 5: 190.

Reflexive comparison is aesthetic judgment, because the suspension of ready-made categories and determinate judgment leaves us no choice.

(Privately, I call reflective and non-reflective comparisons the “smart” and “stupid” kinds, but I admit that this wording may not be helpful.<sup>7</sup> Still, at a time when more raw information is available to more people than ever in human history, it is an astonishing paradox that so many of us take refuge from experience in hashtags and other shorthand ways of signaling a lofty disregard for the details, from “#mansplaining” to “#virtuesignaling,” from “#fakenews” and “#deepstate” to “#neoliberalism,” “#elites.” If this is how humans behave when performing what Kant calls “determinate judgment,” give me the indeterminate, reflective kind.)

In the cultural sphere, encounters with the foreign must, if we are alert to the fragility of our cognitive equipment, be aesthetic, an improvisation with sense-data and incompletely identified principles. Any degree of adventuring onto the terrain of foreignness will invite such rethinking. If we ask “Was the enterprise of the Gracchi a revolution?” we are partly asking for a characterization of those actions long ago (do they satisfy our criteria for being a “revolution?”), and partly inviting a judgment on our concept of “revolution,” whether its parts hold together strongly or merely by the happenstance of our recent historical experience. Gibbon’s encounter with the imagined Iroquois text is a frustration of universal concepts and an invasion by a “contrariety of ideas.” Cognition gives way to self-cognition: why did I assume these features of common sense? Would they seem plausible to me if I had been “influenced by manners and religious opinions entirely contrary to our own”? If I were not I, in other words, but someone else? Reflective judgment about matters of culture ends up on the territory of the ethical. The “artistic” dealing with otherness made possible by aesthetic-reflective

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7 The demand that comparisons not occur within a pre-established scheme of value is also found in R. Radhakrishnan, “Why Compare?” (in Felski and Friedman, eds., *Comparison: Theories, Approaches, Uses*, pp. 15-33) and David Bloor, *Knowledge and Social Imagery*, second edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976).



judgment raises universality as a question rather than imposing it as a solution.

Compare the confidence of Goethe in the famous conversation that launched the term “Weltliteratur.” Johann Peter Eckermann reports in January 1827:

I dined with Goethe. “Since I saw you,” said he, “I have read many and various things, among which a Chinese novel has occupied and interested me most of all.” – “A Chinese novel?” said I. “That must seem very strange.” – “Not so much as you might think,” said Goethe. “The people there think, act, and feel almost exactly like us; and we should feel perfect congeniality with them, if all they do were not more clear, more pure and more decorous than with us.”<sup>8</sup>

Eckermann expects a Chinese novel to be “strange,” *fremdartig*, but Goethe reassures him: human nature is the same everywhere, only its expressions vary in degree. The lesson for everyone dedicated to the pursuit of literature is, says Goethe, that “poetry is the universal possession of mankind,” and that “National literature is now rather an unmeaning term; the epoch of World literature is at hand, and each one must hasten its approach.” But no one should seek a pattern for composition in the foreign and exotic; rather, “if we want examples, we had best return to the ancient Greeks [...] All the rest we must look at historically” (p. 204). For Goethe in 1827 the mediating concepts were all there: human nature, gradations of purity and decorum, intelligible similes and legends; and the ancient Greeks furnish the touchstone of universal artistic quality.

Although this passage, consecrated through frequent quotation, has been taken as the charter for a comparative-literature field known as World Literature, I find Gibbon a better guide. Stable human nature, the Greeks as timeless, universal standard of art, the quick dismissal of

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<sup>8</sup> Johann Peter Eckermann, *Conversations with Goethe in the Last Years of his Life*, trans. Margaret Fuller (Boston: Hilliard, Gray and Company, 1839), pp. 201-02. I have made some small changes to the wording of the translation.

what is merely historical or anecdotal, that is, particular, in foreign productions: with such preconceptions, the reader is in no danger of learning to value anything new. Why should we undertake comparison, if it is only to tell us what we already know? The weakness of current projects in world literature is that they assume rather than discover what literature is, what the world is, what connects the various phenomena of both. That world is, of course, the globe as currently mapped, with its networks of interchange and translation hinging on a few influential cities; literature is mainly the novel; similarity proves relationships; bigger is better.<sup>9</sup>

Such assumptions guarantee tunnel vision. It is not enough to have a theory and to assemble data. Nor is the goal to have a “powerful” theory, one that explains all its data.<sup>10</sup> A comparative project bears judging for its scope, its categories, and its criteria. What is its scope (its universe, in statisticians’ jargon): How wide a field of phenomena does it cover (how many works, how many centuries, how many kinds of works, in how many languages)? Non-experts often suppose that Big Data will automatically solve the problem of scope, but no data comes without parsing, chunking, processing, and organization.<sup>11</sup> Data exists in categories. As for categories: In attempting to make sense of its multifarious givens, how does a project group and order them? Criteria: What is noteworthy about the examples? On which of their features does the

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9 I drastically and reductively paraphrase Franco Moretti, “Conjectures on World Literature,” *New Left Review* 1 (2000): 54-68, and “More Conjectures,” *New Left Review* 20 (2003): 73-81, to bring out the aspects that have met with the widest diffusion. Moretti’s central claim, offered “as if it were a *law of literary evolution*: [that] in cultures that belong to the periphery of the literary system [...] the modern novel first arises not as an autonomous development but as a compromise between a Western formal influence [...] and local materials” (“Conjectures,” p. 58), could be generated analytically from the meanings he gives to “system,” “center,” “periphery,” “form,” and “materials.” I hear as well in “local” an echo of Goethe’s eternal Greeks and incidental foreigners.

10 As Moretti observes, “that a single explanation may work *everywhere* is both very implausible and extraordinarily boring” (“More Conjectures,” p. 75).

11 See Lisa Gitelman, ed., *“Raw Data” is an Oxymoron* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2013).

comparison dwell? What does the comparison value? And finally, do these aspects differ from the common practice (dissent being a good thing in my view)? If one is doing research rather than inventory, a bit of unpredictability is desirable: Could the present combination of theory and data, with some adjustment, have led to different conclusions? Comparisons are arguments, and arguments orient actions, large and small, in the world. No less than the statement of single facts, and indeed rather more inextricably, comparisons can mislead.

World literature implies a world picture, a frame of reference.<sup>12</sup> The observer who is “tired of the old descriptions of the world”<sup>13</sup> may see the making and rectification of such a picture as the farther goal of “world literature.”<sup>14</sup> A practice of world literature that took reflective aesthetic judgment for its model would begin by positing its world as one of *at least two* worlds—in no sense *the* world, for “world” has no singular except for a hypothetical omniscient observer. The panoptic and “unprecedented possibility that the world may be subject to a single center of power” (Moretti, “More Conjectures,” p. 81) that forms the post-Cold War background to the recent raft of world-literature projects nonetheless harbors spaces of dissent. (You are looking at one now.) History contains variously organized worlds and networks. The literary world experienced by the pre-Columbian Mayans, for example, must have had its centers and peripheries, its forms and local variants, its canons, parodies, and detritus, and neither “the European novel” nor “the ancient

12 Martin Heidegger, “Die Zeit des Weltbildes,” 75-113 in *Holzwege* (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1950) contends that modernity and the institution of a “world picture” amount to the same thing. On the differences between 1938 and 1950 versions of this essay, a difference in “world pictures” indeed, see Sidonie Kellerer, “Heideggers Maske. ‘Die Zeit des Weltbildes’ – Metamorphose eines Textes,” *Zeitschrift für Ideengeschichte* 5 (2011): 109-20.

13 Wallace Stevens, “The Latest Freed Man,” in *Collected Poems* (New York: Knopf, 1954), p. 204.

14 See Haun Saussy, “The Comparative History of East Asian Literatures: A Sort of Manifesto,” *Modern Languages Open* 1 (2018), 20, available at <https://www.modernlanguagesopen.org/articles/10.3828/mlo.voio.206/>; and “The Three Futures of World Literature,” *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature / Revue canadienne de littérature comparée* 44 (2017): 397-406.

Greeks” had anything to contribute to it. Gaze on the polyglot Central Asian library of Dunhuang, preserved by accident from the year 1000 or so, with its records of international haggling, rivalry, and proselytizing. Or the still barely read archives of cuneiform.<sup>15</sup> It is not antiquarian nostalgia that calls us to reconstruct these literary worlds, but a desire to know what literature is *in general*, what a world is *in general*, and what the combination of these two tends to yield.

Being “astonished and instructed” by foreignness, as Gibbon imagines it, is a scene of aesthetic judgment. In Anglo-American academic parlance at present, the word “aesthetic” is rich in connotations of self-interested hypocrisy: in the scenes it conjures up, the idle rich pursue beauty as a touchstone of status, slamming an exquisitely fashioned door on politics, economics, and the masses. Kant’s use of the term *aesthetic* to indicate a mode of cognition without certainties, in which we are forced to wield our wits “technically [...] artistically” in crafting provisional translations for things as yet without a name, gets at the pragmatic (and thus, unavoidably ethical) results of contact with the foreign. I have previously argued that the usefulness of interdisciplinary research, particularly in comparative literature, has always been not to extend existing disciplines over previously unclaimed territory, but to provoke a kind of mismatch or backlash, and a consequent rethinking. That praise of unpredictability has been misunderstood as cheering for ignorance.<sup>16</sup> There is a place for the tried-and-true, but piling up results is not the main value of comparative and interdisciplinary study; making discovery possible is, I think.

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15 “In spite of continued great interest in mankind’s earliest documents it has been estimated that only about 1/10 of the extant cuneiform texts have been read even once in modern times.” Lee Watkins, Jr., and Dean Snyder, “The Digital Hammurabi Project,” available at <http://www.jhu.edu/digitalhammurabi/>, (accessed September 10, 2017).

16 Jacob Edmond, Haun Saussy and David Damrosch, “Trying to Make It Real: An Exchange,” *Comparative Literature Studies* 53 (2016): 660-93.



## The Family of Comparisons

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What does comparison do—intellectually? Epistemic comparison is hypothetical, inferential, a way of gathering evidence into constellations promised to meaningfulness. If item X in context A resembles item N in context B, is there an item Y in context A to which an item P corresponds in context B? Are X and Y related in the same way as N and P? If yes, if no, what are the consequences?

Although the Persians “have never believed the gods to be like men, as the Greeks do,” says Herodotus, “they call the whole circuit of heaven Zeus, and to him they sacrifice on the highest peaks of the mountains”; they have also learned from the Assyrians and Arabians to sacrifice to a Heavenly Woman (Οὐρανίη) whom the Greeks call Aphrodite, the Assyrians Mylitta, the Arabians Alilat, and the Persians Mitra.<sup>1</sup> Analogy serves Herodotus as a technique for exploring the unknown. As if to say, “if they have a god who inhabits the sky and receives sacrifice on mountain tops, the name of that god must be Zeus,” a deity Herodotus is more generous about sharing with the foreigners than his successor a thousand years later, Theophanes. (The mountaintop deity is said to be identical with Zeus, although the Persians according to Herodotus “have never believed the gods to be like men”; so “Zeus” here comes to name a function, a position, when similarity of appearance falls short.) The pantheons of polytheism occasioned some of the first sustained discussions of cultural comparability applied to the Greeks,

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<sup>1</sup> Herodotus, *Histories*, 1.131.

Romans, Egyptians, Etruscans, Gauls, Persians, Indians, and other peoples of the world known to (say) Strabo. Others occurred in the related field of legend, as when someone passing for Plutarch observed that the ancient history of Rome is rife with parallels to Greek local histories.<sup>2</sup> What lies behind Herodotus's guesswork—a common Indo-European linguistic and mythological background on which Greeks and Persians alike draw—would not be more fully painted in until the late eighteenth century. Before announcing the far more renowned discovery that Sanskrit, Persian, Latin and Greek must “have sprung from some common source, which, perhaps, no longer exists,”<sup>3</sup> Sir William Jones had tried his hand at the ancient scholarly pastime of correlating the pantheons, proposing in a 1784 paper that “when features of resemblance, too strong to have been accidental, are observable in different systems of polytheism, without fancy or prejudice to color them and improve the likeness, we can scarce help believing that some connection has immemorably subsisted between the several nations who have adopted them.”<sup>4</sup> The resemblances the comparatist advances must be “too strong to have been accidental” and should not be of a kind that “fancy or prejudice” could have artificially generated—advice that recalls the law court's approach to proof, for Jones was a judge by profession. The preponderance of evidence is what counts. One or two similarities prove little. Herodotus, in fact, is batting at the level of chance, with one generally accepted identification (Zeus as a variant of the general

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2 Pseudo-Plutarch, “Parallela minora,” in *Moralia*. No consequence is drawn there, though much later Georges Dumézil would seize on exactly such parallels in legendary history to assert the predominance of thought-patterns attested in Indo-European myth.

3 William Jones, “The Third Anniversary Discourse” (1786), in *Asiatick Researches, or Transactions of the Society Instituted in Bengal* 1 (1798): 443. Sheldon Pollock notes that Siraj al-Din Ali Khan Arzu had preceded Jones by about thirty years in observing the concordance between Sanskrit and Persian. See Pollock, “Future Philology?” *Critical Inquiry* 35 (2009): 931–61, p. 938.

4 William Jones, “On the Gods of Greece, Italy and India” (1784), *Asiatic Researches* 1: 221–75, p. 222.

Indo-European sky father) and one miss (Herodotus gets Mitra's gender wrong and should rather have connected him to Hermes as patron of exchange or Zeus as guarantor of oaths). A well-formed comparative demonstration involves many parallels and suggests a reason behind them.

That reason may lie in the past. The logic of historical reconstruction common to comparative mythology and comparative linguistics permits the discovery (as Jones put it) of "some connection," undocumented as such in the records of a linguistically and culturally fragmented humanity, that has "immemorially subsisted." At about the same time that Jones wrote about ancient India, comparative anatomy furnished zoology with similar inferences. Georges Cuvier, working in the preserved animal collections of the Jardin des Plantes in Paris, found that despite their manifest differences (no one could confuse a whale and a mouse), the animals of the world were as if variations on a single theme. In his *Leçons d'anatomie comparée* (1800-1805), Cuvier modified the static and hierarchical classifications of the animal world with a vast comparative argument. A whale's skeleton, subjected to a certain set of regular transformations, could turn into an elephant's or a mouse's skeleton. Nature became a unitary spectacle, a proportional demonstration of the mutual convertibility of species. The evidence filled room after room in the Muséum national d'histoire naturelle; the savants and curious flocked to hear his demonstrations. The meaning of "comparative" in Cuvier's usage came down to laws of coherence and of totality.

In the living state, the organs are not only next to one another, but [...] act on one another, and contribute together to a common end. For this reason, should any of the organs undergo a modification, its influence will extend to all the others. Those modifications that cannot coexist rule one another out; other modifications demand their counterparts, so to speak, not only in organs that are in immediate contact with one another but even in those that at first glance appear to be most distant and independent from one another. [...]

No bone can vary in its facets, in its curvature, or in its protruberances, without the others undergoing proportionate variations; and it



is possible to derive from the observation of a single bone conclusions about the whole of the skeleton.<sup>5</sup>

Cuvier offered a synoptic view of the whole animal kingdom, from which random or mechanical variation was absent. Every bone of every vertebrate animal was related to every bone of every other vertebrate, by proportion and analogy. No species was an island.

Friedrich Schlegel claimed something similar for languages: "This decisive point [namely, the priority of Sanskrit over Greek and other European idioms] is clarified by the inner structure of languages or comparative grammar, which is to give us entirely new conclusions on the genealogy of languages in the same way that comparative anatomy has cast light on higher natural history."<sup>6</sup> Schlegel's comparison between two comparative sciences was only a promise of future results. A more fully realized *Vergleichende Grammatik* drawing on seven Indo-European languages would appear in 1833-52, compiled by Franz Bopp. Although Bopp and Schlegel could hardly be less alike in their literary personalities and cultural commitments, the recurrence of the title phrase evokes the epistemic power of Cuvier's arguments for the analogy among different animal bodies, which had already become part of the common awareness of educated people.<sup>7</sup> One can imagine that Bopp's tables of

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5 Georges Cuvier, *Leçons d'anatomie comparée* (Paris, 1800), vol. 1, pp. 46, 56-57. For a detailed study of the debt of historical linguistics to Cuvier's epistemology, see Guy Jucquois, *Le comparatisme: émergence d'une méthode* (Louvain: Peeters, 1993), and for a recent invocation of Cuvier as a pattern for historical research, see Carlo Ginzburg, "Medals and Shells: On Morphology and History, Once Again," *Critical Inquiry* 45 (2019): 380-95. Cuvier was not alone. See Gordon McOuat, "Cataloguing Power: Delineating 'Competent Naturalists' and the Meaning of Species in the British Museum," *British Journal for the History of Science* 34 (2001): 1-28.

6 Friedrich Schlegel, *Über die Sprache und Weisheit der Indier* (Heidelberg, 1808), p. 28, cited in Konrad Koerner, *Practicing Linguistic Historiography* (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 1989), p. 276. Koerner shows that Schlegel, while studying Sanskrit in Paris, requested a letter of recommendation from Cuvier.

7 On divergences between Schlegel and Bopp, see "Introduction: Ignoring Saussure," in David L. Hoyt and Karen Oslund, eds., *The Study of Language and the Politics of Community in Global Context, 1740-1940* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 2006), pp. 12-13.

parallel forms in the Indo-European languages were read similarly to Cuvier's copperplate engravings. The place of a consonant in a word was analogous to the place of a bone in the body of an animal: as the species differed, so the languages differed, but among the parts of each could be observed certain constant proportions and regular deformations. Comparison and comparability belonged to the intelligible structure of the world; indeed they made it intelligible.

Schlegel's attempt to trade on the reputation of comparative anatomy for rigor and consequentiality overstepped the boundaries of Cuvier's science, a descriptive and classificatory discipline that ventured no hypotheses about unobservable history. More conspicuous in the public eye, better at securing institutional support than Jean-Baptiste Lamarck and Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire, Cuvier gave as little room as possible to explanation of the relatedness of similar phenomena. He was a believer in the fixity of species.<sup>8</sup> The origin of the elephant was the elephant. Yet God had shaped the elephant on a pattern shared with every other vertebrate animal. The reasons behind that pattern must remain a mystery. Cuvier's marvelous descriptions simply described species after species, specimen after specimen. They amounted to a morphology: an analysis and correlation of parts. But Schlegel, captivated by the implications of Sanskrit, promised something more: "a genealogy of languages." Unlike species, languages were historical and their changes could be observed. Linguistic comparison discovered not just similarities and proportions, as Cuvier's morphologies had done, but enabled a search for the "connections" (Jones again) "that had immemorially subsisted among" similar forms. "Laws" of phonetic change permitted generalization, reconstruction, and extrapolation, explaining how languages in the same family differed from one another and from a common proto-language. As natural-history methods and metaphors were reworked into historical linguistics, the

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8 On the latent tension between functional and evolutionary explanations in French biology of the time, see Valerie Racine, "The Cuvier-Geoffroy Debate" (2013), in *Embryo Project Encyclopedia* (online resource, dated 7 October 2013), available at <http://embryo.asu.edu/pages/essay-cuvier-geoffroy-debate>.

adjective “comparative” changed in meaning. Analogy pointed back to history; history justified analogy—cleared it of the suspicion of “fancy or prejudice,” gave it something to be about.<sup>9</sup>

Morphology produces anatomies and classifications. Building on morphology, derivation establishes grades of likeness and nominates ancestors on the grounds of shared traits: it draws family trees.<sup>10</sup> Before Darwin showed that species, too, were historical, linguistics enlarged the human family by showing, for example, that the genius of the French language is not unique to France, French people, or Frenchness, but is shared, in some high percentage, with German, English, Irish, Persian, Latvian and Bengali. Through comparative practices in linguistics, archaeology, ethnography, religious history, and above all through scholarly investigation, translation, and imaginary investment in the “Orient,” the range of available cultural knowledge widened.<sup>11</sup> Ernest Renan did not hesitate to measure that widening in units of “worlds”:

Ever since the fifteenth century the sciences having for their object the human intellect and its works have made no discovery to be compared to that which has revealed to us in India an intellectual world of marvellous wealth, variety and depth, in a word, another Europe. If we review our most settled ideas in comparative literature, in linguistic knowledge, in ethnography, in criticism we shall find them stamped and modified by this grand and capital discovery<sup>12</sup>

—namely the philological discovery of India by Jones, Schlegel and Bopp. “We must consider the revolution philology has wrought [...] And

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9 See Devin Griffiths, *The Age of Analogy: Science and Literature Between the Darwins* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016).

10 The first such tree of language relationships was drawn by Bopp's student August Schleicher after reading Darwin's *Origin of Species*. See Robert J. Richards, “The Linguistic Origin of Man: August Schleicher and the Missing Link in Evolutionary Theory,” 159-91 in Richards, *Was Hitler a Darwinian? Disputed Questions in the History of Evolutionary Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).

11 See Raymond Schwab, *La renaissance orientale* (Paris: Payot, 1950).

12 Ernest Renan, *The Future of Science: Ideas of 1848 (L'Avenir de la science, 1890; Eng. trans. Albert D. Vandam and C. B. Pitman, 1891)*, p. 127.

it seems to me that [...] the most important revolutions of thought have been brought about by those men whom we should call *littérateurs* or philologists.<sup>13</sup> Philology revealed the foreignness of many foreign languages to be only superficial, at the same time as the development of new means of transport, weapons, and articles of commerce eroded the borders of nations. Language families took on flesh, becoming ethnicities. These “spectres of comparison” moved about history, claiming agency, taking credit or blame.<sup>14</sup> This was yet another new thing that comparison made happen. Sanskrit and its kindred languages could now be seen to reach from Iceland to Java and Kamchatka, not to mention North and South America, a condition celebrated by the Yale Sanskritist William Dwight Whitney, a student of Bopp. Whitney exulted in “the last and grandest era of Indo-European supremacy,” “the era in the midst of which we now live.”

One source of the special interest which we feel in the study of Indo-European language lies in the fact that our own tongue is one of its branches. [...] But we are further justified in our somewhat exclusive interest by the position which our languages, and the races which speak them, hold among other languages and races. [...] For the past few centuries, the European nations have stood foremost, without a rival, in the world's history. They are the enlightened and the enlighteners of mankind. [...] The network of their ability embraces the globe; their ships are in every sea between the poles, for exploration, for trade, or for conquest; the weaker races are learning their civilization, falling under their authority, or perishing off the face of the land, from inherent inability to stand before them. [...] They have inherited from its ancient possessors the sceptre of universal dominion [...] and they are worthy to hold it, since their sway brings, upon the whole, physical

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13 Renan, *The Future of Science*, p. 133.

14 The phrase, from José Rizal's 1887 novel *Noli me tangere*, serves as title and leitmotif of Benedict Anderson's book of essays *The Spectre of Comparisons: Nationalism, Southeast Asia, and the World* (London: Verso, 1998). I use it here to antedate the relation of comparison to fantasized collectivities.

well-being, knowledge, morality and religion to those over whom it is extended.<sup>15</sup>

Comparison did well enough as a means of world-enlargement when it was a matter of recovering “the immemorial connections” among the favored race. But when it extended to “the weaker races,” comparison became, like certain kinds of marriage in certain states once upon a time, illegitimate. Maurice Olender narrates the expansion and contraction of the comparative model, enlarging Europe only to solidify the outer fortifications of the new construct.<sup>16</sup> Or as Marcel Detienne puts it in a few words:

The science of civilizations, it seemed, portended a discipline that would be the common ground of both historians and anthropologists [...] But in short order came the classification of cultures by a comparison of values, on a scale leading from the most primitive to the most highly evolved[...]. And presently the ancient societies of the Greco-Roman world, with Athens as world capital, were pronounced forbidden territory for comparativism. A “one-way street.”<sup>17</sup>

Indeed the worry that comparative genealogies might go too far had inspired a hesitation early on in Jones’s 1784 essay on mythology. Jones’s demonstration of mythological relatedness between India and Greece was fenced around by disclaimers: these findings applied only to the pagan pantheons, and although “some intelligent and virtuous persons are inclined to doubt the authenticity of the accounts delivered by *Moses* concerning the primitive world,” a flaw in “the fabric of our national religion” is “a conclusion which, I trust, none of us should wish to be

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15 William Dwight Whitney, *Language and the Science of Language* (New York: Charles Scribner & Company, 1868), pp. 230-32.

16 Maurice Olender, *Les langues du Paradis: Aryens et Sémites, un couple providentiel* (Paris: Gallimard-Le Seuil, 1989). “The hypothesis of an Indo-European family of languages was a discursive retreat from the universalism of the Enlightenment [...] ultimately it was a science of the Aryan clan” (Hoyt and Oslund, “Introduction: Ignoring Saussure,” p. 14).

17 Marcel Detienne, *Comparer l’incomparable* (Paris: Seuil, 2000), p. 24.

drawn.”<sup>18</sup> Like his predecessor Vico, whose *New Science* bore only on the history of peoples outside the light of Revelation, Jones was careful to shelter the “national religion” from degrading comparisons. (Without, let it be said in this case, *racial* animus: Jones is sheltering Moses and his Christian interpreters from potentially invidious comparisons with rival Indic and Greek accounts of the creation of the world.) Thus amidst the ambitious comparisons of Enlightenment and romantic oriental study, a note of incomparability is struck.

Producing family trees and common ancestors, historical reconstruction founds a tribe. That is its goal and its limit. It has nothing to say about those outside the fold; for them, new starting points and parentages must be constructed. And it can artificially create outsiders by manipulating the terms of comparison. Cuvier, whose lessons and illustrations showed the lawlike uniformity of the entire animal kingdom, sheltered Europeans from too close kinship with Africans by enclosing the latter in a distinct type or species. Plate III of his *Tableau élémentaire de l'histoire naturelle des animaux*, captioned “Têtes des mammifères,” depicts the skulls of a cat, a dog, a hedgehog, a baboon, an orangutan, a “European” and a “Negro” side by side, as if the ontological distances among these “species” were equivalent.<sup>19</sup> Kant, regrettably, exempted Africans from the duties and protections of the Categorical Imperative.<sup>20</sup> And Renan, after a youth spent spreading the tapestry of German philology to cover the major cultures of the ancient world (“I

18 Jones, “On the Gods of Greece, Italy and India,” p. 225.

19 Georges Cuvier, *Tableau élémentaire de l'histoire naturelle des animaux* (Paris: Baudouin, an 6), planche III.

20 See for example Léon Poliakov, “Racism from the Enlightenment to the Age of Imperialism,” 55–64 in Robert Ross, ed., *Racism and Colonialism: Essays on Ideology and Social Structure* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1982). A good survey including the earlier commentary literature is Pauline Kleingeld, “Kant’s Second Thoughts on Race,” *The Philosophical Quarterly* 57 (2007): 573–92. The shift in Kant’s opinion on Africans and Native Americans, from denying them full membership in humanity to including them under moral universals, comes, according to Kleingeld, shortly after 1792. Might the shift have been a response to reports of the revolt of the slaves of Santo Domingo (begun 1792) that resulted in Haitian independence (1804)?

am under the impression that the comparative study of the different literatures has afforded me a much wider idea of human nature than that generally conceived. No doubt there is a good deal that is universal”), conceded in 1890 that his early work lacked “a sufficiently clear perception of the inequality of races.”<sup>21</sup> Whitney had that “sufficiently clear perception,” alas, and it shows in his judgment of the colonial order of his time as the honor and glory of the Indo-European ethnicity. We can in turn issue a verdict on such models of historical comparison. Comparisons designed to establish common descent risk being *myopic* (rather in the style of Theophanes); those that stake a claim to superiority are *invidious* (conscious of rivals and resentful of them). Myopic and invidious comparisons use the forms of analogy to suspend comparison, to craft islands of incomparability. The two modes of failure do not by any means exclude one another: when Cuvier or Kant relegate millions of their fellow-beings to a subhuman category, they exhibit both myopia and invidiousness. Their decision to do so cannot be entirely blamed on the times. Many of their contemporaries would have argued that the bounds of our sympathy and interest, to use language they might have employed, should not be so narrow.<sup>22</sup>

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21 Renan, *The Future of Science*, pp. 163, xix. Renan is of course alluding to the work of Arthur de Gobineau, *Essai sur l'inégalité des races humaines* (Paris: Didot, 1853), and surely ignoring the rebuttal by Anténor Firmin, *De l'égalité des races humaines: anthropologie positive* (1885; reprinted, Montréal: Mémoire d'encre, 2005).

22 On these two poles of reflection in Smith, see Gloria Zúñiga y Postigo, “Adam Smith on Sympathy: From Self-Interest to Empathy,” 136-46 in David F. Hardwick and Leslie Marsh, eds., *Propriety and Prosperity: Archival Insights into the Evolution of Economics* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

## The Elasticity of Substitution

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Within the gates of the University, comparison has an uneven reputation. Benedetto Croce refused the title of “field of study” to comparative literature on the grounds that comparison is a mere analytic mechanism common to all disciplines; the literary scholar should aim rather at the nobler goal of “historical-aesthetic synthesis.”<sup>1</sup> If Walther Rathenau held that “Denken heißt vergleichen” (to think is to compare)<sup>2</sup>, Max Weber was just as persuaded that “the individual can acquire the sure consciousness of achieving something truly perfect in the field of science only in case he is a strict specialist[...]. A really definitive and worthwhile achievement is nowadays always a specialized achievement.”<sup>3</sup> The most that comparison or interdisciplinary chit-chat can do, in Weber’s opinion, is suggest questions that specialists will investigate responsibly. These critiques make comparison out to be something optional or insignificant. The comparative mythographer Bruce Lincoln’s concern is rather with

processes of decontextualization and exploitation. When scholars treat the complex products of another society’s imaginative labors as the raw materials from which they confect their theories, and when they regard their theories as an intellectual product of a higher order

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1 Benedetto Croce, “Varietà: La ‘Letteratura comparata,’” *La Critica* 1 (1903), 77–80.

2 Walther Rathenau, *Auf dem Fechtboden des Geistes. Aphorismen aus seinen Notizbüchern*, ed. Karl G. Walther (Wiesbaden: Der Greif, 1953), p. 71; now rendered in mural tile at the Rathenauplatz subway station, Nuremberg.

3 Max Weber, “Science as a Vocation” (1917), in H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, eds., *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964), p. 134.



than that of the materials they extracted, grievous abuses have been committed.

– Valuable goods have been appropriated, often by those who have little claim to or investment in them.

– The makers of those goods have been recognized and compensated, if at all, in very inadequate fashion.

– Sign-values have displaced use-values as items of discourse and practice that actively shaped people's lives are transformed into 'comparanda' and 'examples.'

– As examples accumulate, they are treated with increasing superficiality and inattention to whatever aspects (all of which had import in their original context) fail to support the comparatist's point.<sup>4</sup>

Lincoln's reproach puts the blame on acts of intellectual exploitation through comparing: appropriation, trivialization. No doubt that "comparison is historiographically and methodologically problematic [...] also charged politically."<sup>5</sup> But it is no less true that the refusal to countenance comparison can perform the opposite kind of injury, by perpetuating privilege. Marcel Detienne's *Comparer l'incomparable* responds to one such case. A historian and a Hellenist, Detienne was attracted, in the rosy dawn of structuralism, to the inherently comparative discipline of anthropology and then found himself shunned as having entered into a *mésalliance*. Detienne found over the years that collective research proposals involving the comparison of widely divergent societies, with different modes of social organization, living in different times, on different continents, met with little favor

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4 Bruce Lincoln, *Apples and Oranges: Explorations In, On, and With Comparison* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), p. 9. Similar misgivings are voiced by Rita Felski and Susan Stanford Friedman in the introduction to *Comparison: Theories, Approaches, Uses*. For a normative account of the usefulness of comparison and variation in history, economics, and sociology, see John Gerring, "Causation: A Unified Framework for the Social Sciences," *Journal of Theoretical Politics* 17 (2005): 163-98, esp. pp. 184-89 and note 26.

5 Ann Laura Stoler, "Preface to the 2010 Edition," *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule*, second edition (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), p. xiii.

among the arch-druids of the profession. *Comparer l'incomparable* is his counter-attack. Its shafts are directed, with a startling lack of team spirit, at the sorts of historians and Hellenists most likely to occupy the summits of their professions in France. Detienne contends that the eminent colleagues seated or standing upon those distinguished chairs have bartered intellectual integrity for the courtier's currency, influence. What this means is both intra-professional influence (the ability to get jobs for your students and money for your research projects) and the kind of clout that public intellectuals can wield (a reputation for wisdom and relevance that will ensure that *Le Monde* or *L'Express* will call you for a quote the next time there is a need to run an article about the crisis of Europe or the politics of memory, and for a few top-ranked players, a role as ministerial or presidential advisor). The entry fee for such public recognition is a willingness to pay homage to the myth of national uniqueness—the eternal question of French identity, always to be answered in the affirmative—and beyond that to the myth of European uniqueness, itself rooted in a story that tells how the Greek miracle of reason and democracy, created simultaneously with classical art and literature, was in a secret formula mysteriously carried through the ages to flower again in the democracies of the modern West.

If Greece has been declared “incomparable,” it was under the pressure of our national patriots eager to claim ownership of the heritage of Plato and Homer—and that of the West to boot. [...] Comparing Greeks with Greeks not only annoys nobody, but coincides with the interest of historians who are naturally lovers of the Nation and strict observers of disciplinary lines. Yes, honor the institution, salute the customs-officers, show the right passport, and everything else will come besides: professional recognition, decorations, membership in honorary societies, knighthoods. Quite a dizzying prospect, for a barely noticeable abdication.<sup>6</sup>

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6 Detienne, *Comparer l'incomparable*, pp. 12-13. Translation mine. The proximate cause of Detienne's bitterness on the subject is the failure of a proposed chair in “Comparative Anthropology of Ancient Greece” at the Collège de France in 1992, submit-

These two fictions prevail across dividing lines of Left and Right (among the colleagues Detienne mentions one finds both loyal communists and loyal Gaullists) and across centuries of social change. Since they are identitarian constructs, they are not easily questioned by those who have a stake in maintaining those identities; and in order to prevent such questioning, Detienne contends, they have been fenced around with the primordial prohibitions, *Thou shalt not compare* other societies with the Athenian Greeks; *thou shalt not analyze* the unique properties of the national soul. Or as the prohibition is usually expressed: “one must compare only what is comparable.” Legitimate historians compare, if they are in an adventurous mood, England during the reign of Charles the First with France in the reign of Louis XIII, the parallel stages of German and Italian unification, Stalin’s and Franco’s responses to falling birthrates—that sort of thing, the comparability of the cases being guaranteed by a large cushion of sameness. Where the similarities between two things are not obvious (that is: consented, cemented by precedent, a matter of common sense), comparison becomes questionable. But it is precisely the non-obvious kind of comparison that can serve as a means of discovery unavailable to the Weberian specialist.

Like common sense in Descartes’ humorous prologue, incomparability is of all things the most well-distributed, for rare are the cultures that have not classified themselves as unique. (*Incommensurability*, a concept whose history in cultural studies is well worth tracing, has sometimes served to express this desire on behalf of populations in fear of being compared out of existence.) If the modern Europeans were the only ones suffering from this form of injured narcissism, we could content ourselves with demolishing Eurocentrism. But we know that the symptom is rather more widely distributed.

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ted by Yves Bonnefoy, for which Detienne was the nominee. See Pascale Rabault-Feuerhahn, “La comparaison fait-elle la discipline? Intitulés comparatistes et dynamique des chaires au Collège de France,” 383-434 in Wolf Feuerhahn, ed., *La politique des chaires au Collège de France* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2017).

In his ill-omened matchmaking among disciplines, Detienne advocates not case-by-case comparison but rather “experimenting” with the materials, “manipulations... [that] put into contact and cause reactions among phenomena or configurations that are never repeated in their entirety during the course of history... so as to reveal the transformations of some of the elements that go into these phenomena and configurations.” “What are the ‘comparables’ between historians and anthropologists?” he asks.

They are not themes [...] but mechanisms of thought that may be observed in the articulations among the elements brought into relation. [...] In this constructive (as you see) comparatism, the “comparables” are not types whereby to establish a typology [of acts of founding] according to, let’s say, whether the founders are hunters, rambler, cautious, impetuous, etc. Nor are they forms wherewith to build up a morphology of territories or dwellings [...] The “comparables” are the surfaces of linkage [*plaques d’enchaînement*] that have been determined by a choice, an initial choice. Historians and anthropologists, habituated to working together, give priority to assemblages that proceed from neighboring but different logical choices.<sup>7</sup>

Detienne knows very well that proceeding in this way will disturb both historians and anthropologists: the historians because context and causality are disregarded, and the anthropologists (at least those of a certain functionalist stripe) because to do so violates cultural integrity, the idea that an element gains its meaning from its place in a system. Systems break down all the time in the normal course of history. Evolving cultures, or comparatists in a hurry, can also break a narrative into pieces, the better to combine those pieces with the shards of a different culture’s narrative. Thus for example the act of “founding” in Greek history and legend, which may contain a great many thematic features obligatorily linked together by the investments of that culture—the founding hero, the drawing of boundaries, a sacrifice as part of the new beginning, an oath, the presence of strangers,

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7 Detienne, *Comparer l'incomparable*, pp. 103, 51-52.

etc.—becomes just one of many combinations of possibility when put alongside founding acts in other histories that articulate different sets of components under a different body of rules. The category then opens up and no longer has a classic example or statutory definition. The comparison has achieved commensurability (not interchangeability, which was never aimed at anyway). Since an act of “founding” is often the reference point for irreducible identities (consider American exceptionalism with its cult of the Founding Fathers), it is an obvious strategic point of intervention for the questioning of inherited labels. Another sport previously considered exclusive, “Athenian democracy,” Detienne and his group intentionally de-sacralize as one among many variant “practices of assembly.” Who comes together, where, and why? Who speaks, and do they speak otherwise than outside the assembly? How are procedures codified? What distinguishes the expression of will and the use of force? The point is not to extract a thin common denominator (e.g., “people everywhere have forums for the expression of views”) but to get a sense of the elements that may be found and the constraints that do or do not apply to their occurrence in a particular situation. In other words, to establish a basis of likeness that permits extension into many particular contexts rather than having to be left behind as condition of ascending into the particular horizon of this or that historical world. The objection may be raised that such analytic projects are ahistorical (a variant of the objection that they compare apples and oranges, or deny the lived socio-cultural reality of the apple so as to make it interchangeable with the orange). It is rather, I think, that they aim at creating an alternative to historicized explanations, or, in the spirit of critique, that they reveal how often our explanations of events are a mere thinking-backwards, in the mode of necessity, of the results of chance or adventurous combinations.

The tacit criterion of “comparability” among the guilds of historians and Hellenists, says Detienne, is designed to prevent the kinds of discovery that emerge from remote comparisons. Historical comparison is organized, it seems, around a blind spot. There are values to be protected, after all! Just as in a nation with an established church there is, on the one hand, Religion, and on the other hand, “religions”

(or superstitions, heresies, cults, and the like), so in even the eminently secular nation of France there is History, on the one hand, and on the other “histories” (or anecdote, ethnography, counter-example). The position of “historiographe du roi,” of royal historiographer, is no longer directly salaried by the Palace, but the status of French history persists, as does the expectation that its genesis will be traced back only to the most honorable lineages. By declaring that ancient Athens is an apple and contemporary Mali, medieval Japan, north India in the age of the *Mahābhārata*, and so forth are oranges, you are taking away the comparatist’s license to compare—and that is the point of it all. One does not want comparison. What one wants is the infinitely more rewarding untroubled confirmation of uniqueness.

Detienne’s cartography of these two comparison-free zones leads him to suspect a defensive attitude warping, in his view, the objectivity of theoretical investigation. Why should we not compare the behavior of the European Parliament with that of the Ochollo village councils in Abyssinia, for example? Would it not be to the eventual advantage of the concept of democracy to show that it is not limited to a single particular place and time? The “national exemption” from comparison is short-sighted in more ways than one. To accept the comparability of one’s own tradition with those of others is to give up a certain measure of self-centeredness, to abandon the postulate of one’s uniqueness, and to risk injury to one’s self-concept. Let us imagine that a high priest of the French historical profession were to come secretly by night and confess to us that a compelling national interest precluded comparative investigation into the identity of France or the miracle of the West. Would this excuse not be subject to further reason and argument? A challenger might show that the benefit of narcissistic fairy tales is outweighed by the general interest in building up an archive of mutually comparable human experiences from which to reason about possible futures to be shared by a great many peoples.

It may seem that Detienne’s polemic is directed at specifically French folkways. After all, in tracing the history of this prejudice he refers to the Sorbonne, the Collège de France, the *concours de l’agrégation* and similar institutions. The steady succession of Regius Professors of

history and classical studies in the French university through Monarchy, Revolution, Empire, Republic, and so forth, as opposed to the late and scattershot establishment of anthropology in the postwar period, would seem to make this a local story. But look to the English-speaking countries and Germany, where a similar hierarchy of professions, and one within professions, obtains. The history of the home country is always and everywhere the best-rewarded branch of history, occupying the majority of positions in teaching and research, filling the publishers' seasonal lists, becoming, for most people, "History."<sup>8</sup> To speak only of my own country, American self-absorption is an industry. Not only the universities, also the TV channels are full of it. In some countries the study of ancient Greece and Rome retains, despite a notable falling-off of monetary investment, a certain old-fashioned prestige but is always standing by for reserve duty when it is a matter of recalling "who we are," what the meaning of democracy or justice is. Those who study the inhabitants of China, Guatemala or Madagascar, or the Middle Ages and the Safavids, are looked on as providers of anecdote, if not counterexample. People so far out of the mainstream are not, to be blunt, "us," although somehow the Greeks and Romans are considered to be part of "us."

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8 For some indications of publishing and sales trends in US history, see Andrew Kahn and Rebecca Onion, "Is History Written By Men, About Men?," *Slate*, 6 January 2016, available at [http://www.slate.com/articles/news\\_and\\_politics/history/2016/01/popular\\_history\\_why\\_are\\_so\\_many\\_history\\_books\\_about\\_men\\_by\\_men.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/history/2016/01/popular_history_why_are_so_many_history_books_about_men_by_men.html) (accessed October 9, 2018).

## Negative Privilege

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Detienne's examples suggest that comparison is called off where something seen as uniquely good is at stake, where there is a danger of relativizing some jealously guarded claim to national or cultural dignity. But a similar resistance to comparison arises where the uniquely bad is thought to lurk. The permissibility of comparisons is presented as an epistemic matter (a matter of knowing what is and is not comparable) but is more accurately described as ethical (a matter of knowing what is right and wrong to compare). Between the epistemic and the ethical, much implicit traffic occurs.

The *Historikerstreit* in late-1980s Germany, the "quarrel of the historians" over the interpretation of the causes of Hitler's takeover of the Weimar Republic and of the Nazi murder of Jews, Romani, the handicapped, and political opponents, was in large part a reaction to the historian Ernst Nolte's attempt to treat that historical catastrophe as *comparable* to other humanly-caused disasters of the twentieth century and thus as implying, in the view of many readers, *equivalence* among them. As Jürgen Kocka sums up the quarrel:

The most challenging and unacceptable thesis in the "historians' quarrel" consisted in the imputation of a causal connection between the Bolsheviks' previous "Asiatic class extermination" and the National Socialists' "mass extermination", which made the latter a rational, intentionally preventive and thus meaningful reaction to the former. Hardly any historian has defended this thesis of Nolte's. [...]

The comparison, pronounced but never carried out by Nolte, Fest, and others, between, on the one side, Nazi dictatorship and the



Holocaust, and on the other, the other dictatorships and genocides of the twentieth century, was [at least] more debatable. It had the aim (overtly formulated by Nolte) of questioning the singularity of the Nazi mass murders. [...] The fact that comparison is here being used to relativize the seriousness of the thing being compared in no way invalidates the methodical usefulness of comparison. Moreover I find the category of “singularity” not especially useful, whether in methodical, political, or pedagogical terms: if one holds Nazi mass terror to be an absolutely singular thing and removes it from comparative analysis, one is not far from maintaining that such a thing can never be repeated.<sup>1</sup>

The word “singularity” must be taken as expressing not a fact but a reaction based on value. Perhaps even a wish. For Kocka, nothing in history can legitimately be excluded from becoming subject to the practice of comparing, but particular acts of comparison act to trivialize or nullify the things being compared, and that is worth refusing.

Thus even comparisons between the horrors of Stalin and Hitler are valid and possible. But with what cognitive aims? In order to perform comparisons systematically, one must know what questions are to be answered with the aid of comparison. [...] Why would a better insight into the motives, dimensions, mechanisms and consequences of Bolshevik terror reduce German responsibility or collective guilt for Nazi crimes, or remove the burdens of memory?<sup>2</sup>

When the focus is sharpened in that way, it is of course absurd to seek relief for collective responsibility in comparisons. Kocka returns several times in his essay to the theme of historians’ professional duty to their “specific realm of objects, specific methods, specific knowledge, a

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1 Jürgen Kocka, “Deutsche Identität und historischer Vergleich: Nach dem ‘Historikerstreit,’” *Politik und Zeitgeschichte*, supplement to *Das Parlament* 40/41 (1988): 15-28, p. 21. For a representative selection of articles from the quarrel, see Rudolf Augstein et al., “Historikerstreit”: *Die Dokumentation der Kontroverse um die Einzigartigkeit der nationalsozialistischen Judenvernichtung*, eighth edition (Munich: Piper, 1991).

2 Kocka, “Deutsche Identität und historischer Vergleich,” p. 22.

specific rationality of discourse” which should have prevented “polarizations and escalations” like those seen in the “quarrel.”<sup>3</sup> In particular, the historian’s brief does not include issuing moral verdicts or proclamations about national identity. But this retreat into professional “ground rules” obscures the context that made even such poor arguments as Nolte’s an occasion for dramatic pronouncements about the nation, the lessons of the past and the dangers of relativism. Within only a few years the political frame surrounding this 1986-88 debate—the situation of the Bundesrepublik, its relation to NATO and the United States, the competition between West and East, the habits of Cold War thinking—would melt away. In the ideological climate of divided Germany, the polarization that Kocka and others ascribed to Nolte and his supporters was to some extent an inescapable given—which is not to say that such polarization provides the best angle for analysis. To say that the Nazi murders were understandable “in the context of the times” and not different in kind from mass murders going on elsewhere in Eurasia accomplishes a specific local purpose, according to Jürgen Habermas’s response to Nolte:

The ideological planners want to create consensus for a reanimated national consciousness, and at the same time they want to banish the nation-state’s foes from the territory of NATO. For this manipulation Nolte’s theory has great advantages. He can kill two birds with one stone: The Nazi crimes lose their singularity at the same time as they become at least understandable as a response to Bolshevik annihilation campaigns still going on in the present. Auschwitz shrinks to the proportions of a technical innovation and is explained by the “Asiatic” threat of an enemy who is still at our gates.<sup>4</sup>

In other words, the comparison was always there, the danger was just in activating it for a susceptible public. Thus Kocka’s appeals to historical professionalism were somewhat beside the point. Nolte protests against the “black and white images of our militant contemporaries”

3 Kocka, “Deutsche Identität und historischer Vergleich,” p. 18.

4 Jürgen Habermas, “Eine Art Schadensabwicklung,” 62-76 in *Historikerstreit*, p. 71.

that he contends have worked to suppress the good sense of his modest proposal, but it seems that he was counting on his message being carried by the ambient resources of just such polarization.<sup>5</sup> The “quarrel” closely followed and echoed another crisis point in the postwar order, when Ronald Reagan accompanied Helmut Kohl to an official commemoration at the war cemetery at Bitburg, having been made aware that it contained graves of Waffen-SS members.<sup>6</sup> The visit might have been intended as a gesture of reconciliation, but it also suggested an invitation to Germans to consider that Americans had joined in the Second World War not to save Europe (and Germany) from fascism but to defend Germany from communism—exactly as the fascists had claimed to do. Such events put the German past, as well as the continuity of the two German states with their parallel postwar occupations, in a rather glaring light. They also ran athwart certain founding dogmas of the Bundesrepublik: the clean break with the past, the special relationship with Israel, the culture of memory. Habermas, with his public record of allegiance to a political form consisting of constitutional rights and communicative rationality and not to “blood and soil,” could not but repudiate an apologetic attitude for which one genocide could excuse another.<sup>7</sup>

The price of the normalization and reconciliation demanded by Nolte and his allies Hillgruber and Stürmer—not to mention Helmut Kohl and Ronald Reagan—was too high for most historians of Germany, who found the comparison inadmissible. Even today the singularity

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5 Nolte, “Vergangenheit, die nicht vergehen will,” 39-47 in *Historikerstreit*, p. 42. See also Nolte, “Zwischen Geschichtslegende und Revisionismus? Das Dritte Reich im Blickwinkel des Jahres 1980,” in *Historikerstreit*, pp. 13-35, where it is claimed that “the demonization of the Third Reich cannot be accepted” because no human event can be “wholly good or wholly bad, wholly bright or wholly dark” (p. 34).

6 For some responses to this event, see Geoffrey H. Hartman, ed., *Bitburg in Moral and Political Perspective* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986). Both Nolte and Habermas call on Bitburg as example: see Nolte, “Vergangenheit,” in *Historikerstreit*, p. 42, and Habermas, “Vom öffentlichen Gebrauch der Historie: Das offizielle Selbstverständnis der Bundesrepublik bricht auf,” in *Historikerstreit*, pp. 245-46.

7 “The only patriotism that does not alienate us [Germans] from the West is a constitutional patriotism [Verfassungspatriotismus].” Habermas, “Eine Art Schadensabwicklung,” p. 75.

thesis acts to deter such comparisons. The fear is that reducing the Nazis' greatest crime to a mere "case" of something larger will diminish its singularity, that diminution will banalize it, that banality will rationalize it, that rationalization will in the end legitimate it. Hence the need for a taboo. Kocka, in his retrospective on the episode, does not refuse comparison entirely but redirects it.

To be sure, one cannot simply hold that Germany *must* be compared with France, England, the Scandinavian countries, or North America. But there are reasons for doing so—if one wants to discover through comparative research how the "German catastrophe" came about and what it means. For Germany was not only associated with those Western countries by a similar state of economic development and social modernization, but also through common traditions of enlightenment, of human and civil rights, of legal and constitutional governance. Nonetheless Germany became fascist and totalitarian, and the Western countries did not. Why? [...] *With whom one is to be compared* is, in private as in public life, but also in historical research, a decisive question. The choice one makes influences the results of the comparison and necessarily carries normative implications.<sup>8</sup>

Comparison must compare what is comparable, as the maintainers of the consensus that so frustrated Detienne's enterprise would say. If you want to win knowledge from a comparison, you must restrict it to cases that are by and large similar and historically related. Thus, Germany vs. Sweden is a good and instructive comparison, but comparing Germany with the USSR or Cambodia is a hooliganish, absurd, even offensive act. Germany belongs in the set of Western countries with Enlightenment heritage and the rule of law, and the question for Kocka is how it fell out of that set, what went wrong in that specific historical instance. It is best if the comparison points up specifiable distal events as the cause of relevant differences: thus, if there had been no inflation, if Hindenburg had acted differently in 1933, or if the Weimar constitution had been conceived otherwise... Kocka (or his editor) titled another contribution to

8 Kocka, "Deutsche Identität und historischer Vergleich," p. 27.

the quarrel, “Hitler Should Not Be Repressed By Stalin and Pol Pot”—the name of the Cambodian dictator being brought in, apparently, as evidence of the manifest absurdity of comparisons between advanced and backward societies. By reaching for far-off analogs, it seemed, Nolte and his associates were attempting to shrink the crimes of the Nazis in a distanced perspective, to make them mere line-items in a much larger historical accounting. The focus on a uniquely German guilt, so went the relativist argument, derived from the ideological need to keep up political pressure on the Germans so as to ensure their subordination in a new international order designed by the victors of the Second World War. As if to say: ‘everybody was committing genocide, we just had the misfortune to get caught.’ Or, more particularly: ‘you object to right-wing violence; well, here are a hundred examples of left-wing violence, arranged in a series from Lenin to Pol Pot, with numbers to boot.’ And a corresponding emphasis in the work of these revisionist historians on the harm done to the Germans by bombing, invasion, occupation, and resettlement certainly confirms the impression that the aim of comparison in Nolte’s account of the long “European civil war” was to distract, neutralize, and shift blame.

Thirty years after the quarrel, the *singularity* of the Nazi crimes, foregrounded in the title of the Piper Verlag collection, is no longer so obvious.<sup>9</sup> Many instances of “acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole

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9 Which is not to say that the arguments about “singularity” and “incomparability” have been put to rest. Their implications for national self-regard remain even as the nation reshapes itself. The aim of insisting on the singularity of the German extermination effort, for Egon Flaig, is “to terrorize the intellectual world” with “religious language and attitude.” Flaig’s own attitude does not shy from comparisons, not to say hyperbole: “This thought-prohibition is worse than the terroristic uproar on the part of fanaticized Muslim masses against the Danish caricatures [of Mohammed in 2005]. That caused the deaths of seventy people. But this prohibition not only builds a fence of taboos around a considerable area of the twentieth century, declaring it an intellectual no-man’s-land in which the high priests of the hyper-absolute are empowered to shoot to kill without warning; it delegitimizes a basic operation of conceptual thought [...]” (“Das Unvergleichliche, hier wird’s Ereignis. Reflexion über die moralisch erzwungene Verdummung,” *Merkur* 701 [2007]: 978-81, p. 979).

or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such," upon state command or otherwise, come readily to mind.<sup>10</sup> And it is not just that new crimes pile up. Old ones are rediscovered and linked to the signal instances. Jürgen Zimmerer has argued that Nazi actions in the East followed patterns set by colonial warfare in German Southwest Africa. These genocidal acts, predating 1933 by a generation, were, like the campaign in the "Eastern Territories," framed as a competition for space and legitimated by labels of racial "inferiority" and "superiority."<sup>11</sup> (The comparison was in itself not new. Hannah Arendt and Aimé Césaire, among others, had pointed to continuities between the management of colonies and the occupied East. The novelty was in the wealth of detail and the tracing of specific techniques transferred from one domain to the other.) Where Kocka could assert, on grounds of developmental typology, that comparisons across boundaries of East/West or industrialized/nonindustrialized were doomed to yield nonsense, a longer and wider German historical memory demands that comparisons with the non-Western world be made, only not country-to-country and without the fiction of assessing independent, parallel paths through modernity. Other conditions of historical understanding now differ. There is no longer, for example, a competition between the BRD and the DDR to incarnate the "true" postfascist Germany—a feature of 1980s historical writing that apparently motivated some of the competitive rhetoric on the "singularity" of the Nazi crimes.<sup>12</sup> In Germany, the generation of

10 United Nations, "Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide" (1948), available at [http://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/atrocities-crimes/Doc.1\\_Convention%20on%20the%20Prevention%20and%20Punishment%20of%20the%20Crime%20of%20Genocide.pdf](http://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/atrocities-crimes/Doc.1_Convention%20on%20the%20Prevention%20and%20Punishment%20of%20the%20Crime%20of%20Genocide.pdf) (accessed October 17, 2018). The term was coined by the lawyer Raphael Lemkin in 1944.

11 See Jürgen Zimmerer, *Von Windhuk nach Auschwitz?: Beiträge zum Verständnis von Kolonialismus und Holocaust* (Münster: LIT Verlag, 2011), a collection of essays originally published between 2003 and 2011. The "Mondaugen" sections of Thomas Pynchon's novels *V.* (New York: Lippincott, 1963) and *Gravity's Rainbow* (New York: Viking, 1973) already drew this connection.

12 See *Historikerstreit*, pp. 240, 38.

“Flakhelfer”, who experienced the Second World War as teenagers, has gone into retirement. And the break-up of the Soviet Union and the recovery of independence for its client states has opened archives and licensed the release of historical memories of oppression.

If at the time of the *Historikerstreit* the memory of genocide was dominated by one central, recognized, unambiguous and much-discussed instance (the industrialized killing of millions of Jews by Nazi Germany), around that case stood many others, usually analyzed and argued for in reference to the paradigmatic case as described by Raphael Lemkin in 1944.<sup>13</sup> These “other genocides” received less attention and were in addition more or less vigorously contested when brought up in public forums (for example, the Armenian genocide and the near-extermination of Native Americans). One singularity worth noting is that the Germans themselves recognized the case for which their nation had been responsible; Turkey, the United States, and other perpetrators resisted the application of the term “genocide” and often denied the record of events or sought to explain them away. By the early twenty-first century, dozens or hundreds of claims of murder on an ethnic scale had become common knowledge.

The loss of singularity, along with the unequal acknowledgment that genocidal histories receive, brings a sense of unease when comparisons are made, as they inevitably are. The International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, headquartered in Berlin, warns of the “many challenges” and “a number of pitfalls” that loom when analogies are drawn among ethnic extermination campaigns:

Care must be taken [, they write,] not to equate, diminish, or trivialise either the Holocaust or the genocides to which the Holocaust is compared. [...] Care must be taken not to create hierarchies of suffering or allow the value of a comparative study to be diminished by political

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13 For a representation of the conceptual field corresponding to this description, see for example the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance’s page “The Holocaust and Other Genocides,” available at <https://www.holocaustremembrance.com/educational-materials/holocaust-and-other-genocides> (accessed October 1, 2018).

or social agendas or competing memories. [...] This being said, there are certain reasons or strategies for comparing the Holocaust to other genocides that are not fruitful and that definitely should be avoided. Some of these are:

1. The link to other genocides is made to hide certain aspects of one's national history, such as collaboration with Nazi Germany during the Holocaust.
2. The Holocaust is seen as a means of political power in contemporary politics and the link to the Holocaust is made out of political considerations.
3. The link to other genocides is made to diminish or trivialise the Holocaust.<sup>14</sup>

Good and high-minded guidelines, but their application is not straightforward. Every one of the new nationalisms or resentments of Europe, North America and Asia invokes the Holocaust in one way or another.<sup>15</sup> The new nations of Eastern Europe assert their history of oppression by the Soviet Union, whose inheritor state, the Russian Federation, is quick to claim that ethnic Russians are the targets of Holocaust-like preparative measures in the Baltic States, Crimea and Donetsk. For many Ukrainians, it is beyond question that the Holodomor or Great Famine of the 1930s was an act of genocide planned and carried out by Stalin; for Russia, presumably, saying so is a grab at "political power" on the international stage and "is made to hide certain aspects of [...] national history, such as collaboration."<sup>16</sup> Is the Holocaust "diminished and trivialized" thereby? Inevitably, incrementally. When national memories are constructed around such events, it is sure that "hierarchies of suffering"

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14 International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, "The Holocaust and Other Genocides," as cited above.

15 On the competitive use of victim tallies, see Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin* (London: The Bodley Head, 2010), pp. 402-06.

16 Claims that the Ukrainian Maidan movement in 2013-14 was spearheaded by "fascists" and "collaborators" were key to the Russian propaganda response. See Alec Luhn, "The Ukrainian Nationalism at the Heart of 'Euromaidan,'" *The Nation*, 21 January 2014.



will be created: the national catastrophe is the one taught in schools, the one pointed at with a “Never again!” on the national holiday. A new law made to measure in Poland makes it punishable to assert Polish complicity in the wartime exterminations.<sup>17</sup> The name of no event is more often taken in vain, it seems, than the murder of the six million Jews. With this cheapening of memory goes forgetting of the causes. Every scheme of “ethnic cleansing,” executed or merely desired, every newly-launched ethnic political movement, calls on the theory of *Lebensraum* or stokes the fear of “population replacement” in its propaganda. Comparison, it would seem, has a lot to answer for. Perhaps it would have been better to erect a higher fence around it.

Only, with the multiplication of sources and claims, no fence is good enough. When one paradigmatic case guided the conceptualization of extreme evil, at least comparison had a reference point. In works like Timothy Snyder’s *Bloodlands*, such categories as nation, ideology, and ethnicity provide some interpretive guidance, but no clear answers. People in the zone “between Hitler and Stalin” (as the book’s subtitle has it) were rounded up, imprisoned, starved, shot, deported, and sometimes mined post mortem for dental fillings, for any reason or none, by uniformed troops, secret police, greedy neighbors, or fellow prisoners. Collectivization, resettlement, and war are sometimes the

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17 The amendment to a 1998 measure founding the Institute of National Remembrance was originally signed into law in February 2018 and modified to redefine “public misattribution to the Polish Nation or the Polish State of responsibility or co-responsibility for Nazi crimes” as a civil, not criminal, offense in June 2018. For an argument defending it, see Mateusz Morawiecki, “Poland’s Misunderstood Holocaust Law,” *Foreign Policy* (19 March 2018), available at <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/03/19/polands-misunderstood-holocaust-law/> (accessed July 3, 2018). On controversies surrounding the memory of the war in Poland and its memorials, see Tim Snyder, “Poland vs. History,” *The New York Review of Books Daily* (May 3, 2016), available at <https://www.nybooks.com/daily/2016/05/03/poland-vs-history-museum-gdansk/> (accessed May 6, 2016). On the adoption of post-colonial language by populist governments, see Dorota Kolodziejczyk, “Comparative Posts Going Political—the Postcolonial Backlash in Poland,” 177–91 in Lars Jensen, Julia Suárez-Krabbe, Christian Groes, and Zoran Lee Pecic, eds., *Postcolonial Europe: Comparative Reflections After the Empires* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017).

cause of killing and sometimes merely its occasion. With death totals of between ten and eleven million on the Nazi side and between four and six million on the Stalinist side, comparing the wrongs seems absurd, and concern with left-right formal symmetry an unbecoming fetish. Overlapping invasions, partisan groups, and food shortages muddle the accounting. The Eastern Europeans who lived through those times “experienced overlap and interaction” between the two systems that to us appear distinct and opposed; worse yet, they were “condemned to compare” them in such moments of decision as taking off down a refugee path or surrendering to one or the other enemy.<sup>18</sup>

Responses to Snyder’s work—which was bound to be controversial through its synthesis of rough data and necessarily selective narrative—have often accused it of encouraging a thesis of “double genocide,” in which the genocide led by Stalin cancels out that led by Hitler (or the other way round). The work has certainly been received as encouraging by many people whose stories of suffering were not expressible under the conventions and taboos of the pre-1991 universe of memory.<sup>19</sup> Reproving Snyder’s attention to the deaths in the East, Daniel Lazare calls him “very much a son of Nolte” and *Bloodlands* “less an effort to understand what happened in 1933-45 than a milestone in the process of engagement with local revanchist forces.”<sup>20</sup> If one genocide can erase another, then obviously “equation, diminishment and trivialization” are going on. So long as competition for prominence in

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18 Snyder, *Bloodlands*, p. 392.

19 See a round-up of critical passages, with concentration on the Lithuanian reception of *Bloodlands*, in Menachem Kaiser, “Unshared History: Timothy Snyder’s *Bloodlands*,” *Los Angeles Review of Books* (16 October 2012), available at <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/unshared-histories-timothy-snyders-bloodlands/#!> (accessed October 14, 2018).

20 See Lazare’s engagingly titled review, “Timothy Snyder’s Lies,” *Jacobin* (9 September 2014), <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2014/09/timothy-snyders-lies/> (accessed October 16, 2018). It particularly irks Lazare that Snyder has called attention to Vladimir Putin’s attempts to reclaim lost Soviet territories. See also Lazare, “Ernst Nolte’s Revenge,” *Jacobin* (18 October 2016), available at <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2016/10/ernst-nolte-stalin-hitler-fascism-historikerstreit> (accessed October 18, 2018).

memory is conceived as a zero-sum game, the new-found recognition of some must take away from that claimed by others. But no.

Why should memory be so scarce? Why must comparison be taken as equivalence? The perceived threat must be that the line separating good from evil, oppressors from resisters, socialists from fascists, is about to dissolve, and those for whom that line also marks Us from Them are afraid of no longer being recognizable as a We. But the cognitive virtues of the single line and of the triumphant ideology are limited. A rigid comparison that serves only to mark difference impedes understanding no less than a sloppy comparison that makes everything alike.

Historical and moral comparison cannot get stuck on the Hitler-versus-Stalin seesaw. There are more horrors to be explained, horrors that concern more parts of the world. The comparative issue surrounding genocide is no longer unipolar. It is rather a large and confusing plane without the clear ideological orientations that shaped the choice and interpretation of evidence in the “historians’ quarrel.” If, as the IHRA puts it, “the impact of the Holocaust to our present Western society is immense as it took place in the heart of Europe,” the slaughter by the Bosnian Serbs, taking place no farther from the mythical “heart of Europe” than Treblinka and in a time of relative European peace, should put to rest any antitheses between European civilization and outer barbarism.<sup>21</sup> Rather than conceiving of the “other genocides” as translations and of the paradigmatic genocide as the original with which every translation must be compared, in a one-to-many relation, the epistemic ends of comparison might be better served by decentering and flattening the category. When, in the classic phrase, apples are compared with oranges, it is usually without a presupposition about which fruit is more

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21 It has always seemed to me a startling mark of provincialism that both Susan Sontag and Bernard-Henri Lévy so emphasized the scandal of shells falling on a city in *Europe*, a city of civilized people with cafés and theaters. See Susan Sontag, “Godot Comes to Sarajevo,” *New York Review of Books* (21 October 1993), available at <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/1993/10/21/godot-comes-to-sarajevo/> (accessed 18 October 2018).

genuinely, more adequately, or more exemplarily fruit. But I have heard of a small boy who, after years of wartime privation, encountered an orange for the first time and called it a *drôle de pomme* (phony apple).<sup>22</sup> Although, in our experience, apples may be primary, we cannot rightfully deny oranges an existence and a history quite separate from those of the apple. Comparison, to be just, needs to be able to reverse such assumed orders of importance.

So when Jürgen Zimmerer understands the murder of the European Jews as an offshoot of the German colonial enterprise of a generation earlier, this clearly demands a redistribution of our attention and a reorganization of the semantic space around the term “genocide.” Zimmerer’s book of essays, in fact, barely discusses the plight of the Jews, and does so only fleetingly and in parenthesis. At least one scholar has voiced a pained response to this innovation. “Zimmerer is too careful a scholar to have not realized that he repeated, essentially, the gesture to which Holocaust scholars have long objected: elimination of Jews from the discussion uncannily echoes the Nazis’ project.”<sup>23</sup> This seems rather harsh. Is it certain that the shoe does not go on the other foot? Can one not imagine an African scholar contending that the emphasis on Jewish victims, only a subset (per Zimmerer’s thesis) of colonially-inspired suffering, unduly excludes Africans from a history to which they should be central? The point of Zimmerer’s research, if I read it rightly, is not that the two genocides are equivalent, but that they are connected, that their victim-classes are in fact conjoint; the claim that it marginalizes the Jews pulls the classes apart. Moreover, as to the ground of the analogy, was it not essential to the Nazis’ project to maintain the Jews’ identity as Jews while stripping them of their identity as citizens and next

22 I owe this reminiscence to André Martinet.

23 Kitty Millet, *The Victims of Slavery, Colonization, and the Holocaust: A Comparative History of Persecution* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), p. 168 note 18. See also pp. 9, 16, 18. The conclusion of Millet’s book, moreover, seems to imply a condemnation of comparison generally: “To displace the specificity of any one of these groups [i.e., the colonized, the enslaved, and the victims of the Holocaust] is to argue for an interchangeability on which their persecutors had relied. It was the calculus of the Middle Passage, the colonial massacre and the gas chamber” (p. 166).

of their rights as human beings? Analyzing genocide without reference to Jews as such does not take away the relationships and rights that would have protected them, if rights had been at issue. And although Raphael Lemkin was unavoidably thinking about the fate of his fellow Jews in 1943-44 as he elaborated the definition of genocide, he cast it, as a lawyer must, in more abstract terms. No one in 1944 could know that the Bosnians, the Tutsis, the educated classes of Cambodia, or any of the other groups subsequently slated for genocide were on the list, nor could the exact preliminaries of their destruction be foretold. Laws are future-oriented. They deal in open categories (“anyone who...”). But the concepts behind them can only come from the past.<sup>24</sup> The point of defining the crime of genocide was to prevent future occurrences by enacting binding international laws to that effect (an astonishingly visionary act). Without a sufficiently general definition, one cannot recognize a new threat as it emerges. And to be sure, there will be those who seek to understand genocide in order not to prevent it but to repeat it. Like computer viruses and electoral interference, genocide can succeed in repeating itself only by not repeating itself precisely. Although comparison inspires fear of loss and is resisted with all the power associated with group identity—the sacred and its opposite, the accursed—it may be that only comparison provides the resources for holding off the next threat to the very identities that were to be defended by resisting comparison.

What makes a comparison plausible is a situation. Theophanes’s inability to conceive of a comparison, the Klansman’s disingenuous plea for equity, the national stigma for which Nolte and associates sought a remedy through the Bolshevik Black Legend, and so forth are all “justified”, epistemically and morally, through an implied situation that may be imaginary, exaggerated, hemmed in by ignorance, or shaped in keeping with the best available information; and when a public (consisting largely of robots, it may be) endorses these situations, the comparison works. That is to say, it does its work, orienting responses and actions.

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24 As Andrea Frisch pointed out to me, this means that the law always comes too late to do justice to those whose cases shape the law.

To redescribe the situation, to refute a misleading picture of the situation, is to enable a different set of comparisons. Surely not much is wrong with comparison that was not already wrong with the initial endorsement of a situation.

When Geoffrey Hartman, discussing his video archive of Holocaust testimonies at Yale in the late 1980s, was asked by a Chinese graduate student in what perspective he would place the perhaps 30 million preventable deaths from hunger in the Great Leap Forward, he quite honorably said he had no answer.<sup>25</sup> To a new (for him) situation he responded with no comparison one way or the other.

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25 Personal memory; the questioner was Qian Nanxiu. Thirty million, a number often mentioned at the time, may be on the high side, but it is hard to put an end date on the events. For a report on the disaster and its causes, both human and natural, see Yang Jisheng, *Tombstone: The Great Chinese Famine 1958–1962*, trans. Stacy Mosher and Guo Jian (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012).



## Birds of a Feather

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A tourist memory. One late afternoon in June 1980, on my way to Novi Pazar, I was drinking beer with the fire brigade of Kraljevo, Yugoslavia: five young men from the area, one of whom bore the slightly unusual name Ahmet. Ahmet was drinking lemonade. I did not know much Serbo-Croatian, so virtually all of the banter eluded me, but no one seemed to voice hostility or to push the jokes and gossip into conflict territory by making remarks about anyone's diet, home town, mother or sister. The five were just "colleagues," as working-class people in Yugoslavia called each other at the time, not members of rival tribes. If I had asked, I could have found out if Bogdan described himself as Serb or, perhaps, Slovene on his mother's side, if Dragan was Montenegrin or even something more exotic; but in 1980 it would not have been a description compelling action from anyone.

The sun went down. On a hilltop opposite the town somebody lit a series of bonfires that spelled out TITO. (The Marshal-President had died a few weeks before.) "With Tito gone, the country's going to hell," said one of the firemen. *Cult of personality, how very East-bloc*, I thought to myself: *actually no big deal, somebody else will come along, orderly succession and all that.*

Somebody did come along, a succession and proliferation of somebodies: men on the order of Slobodan Milosević, whose political gifts were fitted to narrower ideals and audiences. I often wondered what had become of the firemen I had sat with for a couple of hours. Was Ahmet promoted, say, to brigade chief, to the dissatisfaction of his fellows, who muttered that it was all due to the mayor's assistant, a Muslim



as everybody knew? That would make sense of his promotion, given that by the 1990s the television and the electoral billboards were constantly reminding one of the danger posed by these shifty invaders whose very presence was an insult and an aggression against the Serbs. And did the colleagues then perhaps smash Ahmet's car windows, set fire to his house, or do worse, sure of being protected by nationalist organizations in the region that might also enroll some of them in their paramilitaries morphing into regular armies? Did Ahmet too join an armed group? Were the members of our friendly after-work beer party now firing at each other across the ridges of the Golija?<sup>1</sup>

Genocide is a peril of composite societies. Homogeneous societies can have civil wars, wars that end with a defeat but not an extermination. To create the conditions that make the eradication of one group by another seem rational and desirable, much work must be done. The agency for this is often performative speech, speech that claims to discover a fissure but that would be better described as simultaneously creating and confirming it: speech that classes individuals into tribes, creates collective personalities and narratives of grievance, outlines a future free of enemies. There is, indeed, a dreadfully self-motivating literary quality to such speech. The process begins in comparison—the cry of “Unfair!”—and, through address to a progressively narrower audience, toward the unipolar incomparable; it begins in resentment (that eminently comparative feeling) and concludes in solipsism. That group is richer, stronger, more influential than mine, but only by reversible circumstance. I am what I am because of what you are; if only you were not, I would be more truly myself.<sup>2</sup>

Histories of Rwanda's interethnic violence often begin by pointing out that the Hutu and Tutsi “races” are mythical constructions. They claim that in a traditional past (sometimes described in suspiciously

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1 My memories have been augmented by reading Latinka Perović et al., eds., *Yugoslavia in Historical Perspective* (Belgrade: Helsinki Commission on Human Rights in Serbia, 2017).

2 The first part of this sentence echoes a frequently encountered paraphrase of the ethic of *Ubuntu* or solidarity; the second is invented to express the exclusivism of certain collectivist ethics.

growing terms), the two groups typically lived on the selfsame hill, intermarried, owed fealty to the same (Tutsi) king, and pursued overlapping, socially stratified livelihoods: cattle raising and the arts of political intrigue for the elite, tilling of the soil for the peasants. This changed as Rwanda moved toward independence from Belgium in the late 1950s. Political movements vied for attention and a share of the pie, recruiting their membership along ethnic lines. The most successful of these movements was Grégoire Kayibanda's Parmehutu (Parti du Mouvement d'Émancipation Hutu). The 1957 "Hutu Manifesto" signed by Kayibanda and eight other Hutu intellectuals advised the transitional government to take measures in favor of the racially-defined bloc they claimed to represent, reportedly some 85% of the population, and to break the "Tutsi monopoly" on political office, cultural authority, economic opportunity, and landholding.<sup>3</sup>

Now it is a truth generally admitted that parties and candidates pick out grievances, ambitions, credos, and group identities the way rock-climbers discern cracks and ledges. But it was not just about getting votes. The death of the Rwandan king in 1959 was followed by the first wave of organized massacres of Tutsis. In telling how Rwandan democracy became identified with a racial politics of division and majority resentment, historians of the genocide often reproduce the following quotation from Kayibanda (president 1962-73):

The Hutu and the Tutsi communities are two nations in a single state. Two nations between whom there is no intercourse and no sympathy, who are as ignorant of each other's habits, thoughts and feelings as if

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3 "Note sur l'aspect social du problème racial indigène au Ruanda" (24 March 1957), in Paul Quilès, Pierre Brana and Bernard Cazeneuve, eds., *Enquête sur la tragédie rwandaise (1990-94)* (Paris: Assemblée nationale, 1998), vol. 2, pp. 100-07. The Belgians were in Rwanda as a result of a 1924 League of Nations mandate, following German colonial rule from 1894-1919. On Hutu and Tutsi as "state-enforced political identities," see Mahmood Mamdani, *When Victims Become Killers* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), pp. 73-75.

they were dwellers of different zones, or inhabitants of different planets.<sup>4</sup>

Historians have recognized in these words a loud call for segregation, by legal measures or by the sword.

The events of November 1959 [...] led to a further polarization of attitudes and expectations [...] A major consequence of the rioting was to make the prospects of a “peaceful coexistence” between Hutu and Tutsi all the more remote. Typical of the attitude bred by the events of November was the tenor of the statement issued by Kayibanda on November 27—in which he made a strong case for “segregating” Hutu and Tutsi into two separate zones as a first step toward a “confederal organization.” Citing Disraeli, Kayibanda compared the communities of Rwanda to “two nations in a single state[...]. Two nations between whom there is no intercourse and no sympathy, who are as ignorant of each other’s habits, thoughts and feelings as if they were dwellers of different zones, or inhabitants of different planets.”<sup>5</sup>

The comparative literature scholar can measure Kayibanda’s success in dividing Hutu from Tutsi by glancing at the source the politician was paraphrasing. Benjamin Disraeli’s *Sybil* is little remembered today for its literary merits, but one passage of this “Condition of England” novel is quoted in all the British history textbooks:

Two nations between whom there is no intercourse and no sympathy; who are ignorant of each other’s habits, thoughts and feelings, as if they were dwellers in different zones or inhabitants of different planets; who are formed by different breeding, are fed by different food,

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4 Grégoire Kayibanda, speech of November 27, 1959, as cited in *Jenoside*, the exhibition booklet available at the Kigali Memorial Centre dedicated to the victims of the 1994 genocide.

5 René Lemarchand, *Rwanda and Burundi* (London: Praeger, 1970), pp. 168-69, quoting a mimeographed supplement to *Jya Mbere*, November 27, 1959, no. 3.

are ordered by different manners, and are not governed by the same laws [...] THE RICH AND THE POOR.<sup>6</sup>

I suspect that, as observers of the condition of England in 1845 had to be aware not only of the Corn Laws and the Chartist movement, but also of the Irish famine, there is an effect of suspense intended in the passage. “Two nations” with “no intercourse and no sympathy”—is he talking about the English and the Irish, the Protestants and the Catholics? Is he going to recite centuries of inherited grievances going all the way back to Spenser and Cromwell? But the suspense is resolved in favor, not of ethnicity but economics: “THE RICH AND THE POOR.” That at least is a problem amenable of solution. In a country not utterly cleft into parties or tribes (at least from the point of view of an ambitious young parliamentarian in London), the mention of “two nations” works as a warning: the existence of such a rift was a flaw that novels like Disraeli’s called to be remedied. Political reform and charitable concern were demanded, so that the rich and the poor of England might recognize their common lot. But the fellowship between Hutu and Tutsi had so degenerated by 1959 that Kayibanda could use the very same words to refer to the difference as a fact and moreover to call urgently for a deeper split, a greater separation, a finally adequate barrier between the “two nations,” without at all addressing the motives of the original passage. Probably, in a few years, the mere mention of the number “two” would have been a sufficient reminder. And, simply because the “two nations” conceit was found so persuasive by Kayibanda’s Parmehutu hearers, anyone who attempted to bridge the gap, change the subject, or appeal to solidarity among Rwandans would have been denounced as a compromiser, an interloper from the opposite side or a traitor to one’s own. There could be no comparison between the two groups’ fates, no joint mention of them, that did not confirm the bases of Hutu resentment. The language of separateness achieved what it claimed to be true and called for more confirmation in acts of banishment and killing.

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6 Benjamin Disraeli, *Sybil, or the Two Nations* (1845), chap. 5. Available at <http://www.ibiblio.org/disraeli/sybil.pdf> (accessed August 3, 2006).

The rhetoric of “two nations” did not address Tutsi audiences. It did not, for example, say to them, “Here is what we need from you” or “We would like you to admit the following”: such propositions would have implied a shared space of negotiation in which both parties had a common stake in the outcome. No negotiation involving Tutsi, I surmise, could have been conceived of as fair. Rather, in the “two nations” speech a Hutu speaks to other Hutu about the malevolent and deceptive Tutsi. The “Manifeste Bahutu” of 1957, addressed to the Belgian colonial authorities by a group of Hutu intellectuals including Kayibanda, characterized the majority population as occupying an “eternally inferior situation” under the “total monopoly” of the baTutsi, a foreign (“Hamite”) race; without the interposition of the Europeans, the baHutu would be doomed to “total destruction.” Already in 1957, then, before the first massacre, the language of the Parmehutu founders excludes any middle ground. And no one in the ensuing decades was able to create it.

Intensely polarized situations like the all-or-nothing contest imagined and then installed by Kayibanda’s rhetoric make comparison obligatory. Every word, even a number, is charged with competition. Situations of durable crisis such as the Cold War, decolonization, and partition leave nothing up to chance in the minds of those subject to them: as a society is divided into antagonistic camps, the events it perceives and the words in which it responds to them are drawn into acting as markers on a scoreboard. Reflection and imagination are force-marched into a minimum of alternatives. Confirmation bias becomes indistinguishable from cognition. Tight control over semantic space (seen in the Manifesto’s favored modifiers, “eternal” and “total”) makes concepts rigid, non-porous, unalterable. Control over people should follow. In its effects, obligatory comparison along preset lines is hardly distinguishable from the prohibition on comparing. *Hutu and Tutsi have nothing in common*, says in sum the “Two Nations” speech, *except the fact that everything we lack is something they have* (—in other words, the two have everything in common). *Name any challenge the Hutu face and I will reduce it to the existence of the Tutsi*. A certain picture-book story about decolonization—the departure of the whites followed by national renewal and unity—collapses in the face of such exterminationalist ideology. (Inequality pre-

dated the Germans and Belgians; the latter laid the groundwork of ethnic rivalry; after they were gone, no available focus of allegiance could transcend or abolish it.)

The polarization of words correlates with the polarization of audiences. The audience (and thus, the metric) of Kayibanda's claims on justice is limited to the aggrieved Hutu. It is hard to say which came first, the language of blame and demonization or the habit of speaking only to one's own side. Both tendencies were probably locked in a mutual feedback loop. On the eve of the Belgians' departure, the authors of the "Bahutu Manifesto" saw little more in the tasks and opportunities of independence than pursuing their interethnic grudge. Successive Parmehutu administrations' lack of interest in dealing with the material problems facing the country amounted to an *ex post facto* validation of the Manifesto's obsession with the "two nations" rivalry. A growing population and scarce farmland reinforced a zero-sum logic. The confiscated resources of those killed or pushed out could be redistributed to Parmehutu followers, empirically verifying the thesis that extermination solved material problems. Refugees fleeing the country and establishing camps in Uganda and Burundi, from which they took part in the civil wars of the region, gave backing to the perception of threat. All these factors seemed steadily to reinforce the Hutu-centric epistemology, until the signing of the Arusha accords in 1993. That agreement with the Rwandan Patriotic Front would have allowed exiled Tutsi to return and participate in Rwandan political life. Hailed by the "international community" as a much-needed step towards peace in Central Africa, it threatened to deprive the Hutu ethnic nationalists of their mainspring in crisis rhetoric by showing that compromise was both necessary and possible.<sup>7</sup> In any event, the accords were disavowed by Rwanda's president before they were even signed. They offended against Hutu exclusivity. Not only had Kayibanda's successor negotiated with the devil, but

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7 Conditions "on the ground" were not amenable to reconciliation, to be sure. On the "eerie calm" of areas reconquered, pre-genocide, by the Rwandan Patriotic Front (a result of the flight of Hutu populations), see Mamdani, *When Victims Become Killers*, pp. 186-89, 192.

he had implicitly conceded that Tutsi, too, had grievances and deserved to be accommodated. The monopoly was broken. The peace treaty was therefore retransmitted to the populace as a betrayal and, rather than leading to reconciliation, helped to motivate the biggest episode of mass killing in Rwandan history, what is known (with an unmerited singular) as “the Rwandan genocide.”

Comparison accompanied every step on the way there.<sup>8</sup>

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8 I am not trying to explain the Rwandan genocide, only seeking to characterize some of the rhetorical acts that contributed to it and to relate them to other practices of comparison. I have relied on three analyses in particular: one foregrounding racist historical myths, Alison Des Forges, “The Ideology of Genocide,” *Issue: A Journal of Opinion* 23 (1995): 44-47; one foregrounding a (broken) rights discourse, Mamdani, *When Victims Become Killers*; and one foregrounding Rwanda’s ecological dead end, Paul J. Magnarella, “The Background and Causes of the Genocide in Rwanda,” *Journal of International Criminal Justice* 3 (2005): 801-22. Recovery is another issue altogether. For Mamdani’s contrast between “victor’s justice” (which blames the agents, in the manner of de-Nazification) and “survivor’s justice” (which blames the system, in the manner of de-Sovietization), see pp. 270-73.

## Noli me tangere

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*Diminishing*, when comparison is carried out, and *privileging*, when comparison is refused—it is worth pointing out once more that these words for the untoward effects of comparing are terms for ethical actions, drawn from the same realm as “good,” “evil,” “justice,” and the like. They are not simply matters of fact, knowledge, or deduction. Objects that are too far up or down the moral scale, absolute good and absolute evil, defy comparison. Of course it takes a community to evaluate them on that scale, and a discordant group within that community may respond differently to the prospect of comparison, thus putting themselves farther out on the margins. Or an enterprising rhetorician like Kayibanda can endeavor to burn half of the comparative bridge. Comparison functions in the middle zone, where things are a mix of good and bad or of self and other, and contact with what is polluting or transcendent is not feared.

And, turning this assertion round, we can learn from comparisons that are refused or suppressed where a public’s untouchable objects lie, what it holds vile or sacred.<sup>1</sup> The comparison of comparisons—of acts

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1 In US politics, publishing, and academia, it would appear that “race” currently occupies the position of a non-negotiable identity principle, an essence not to be relativized by comparisons, and “gender” has begun a decline from that position. The causes and implications are obscure to me. Arguments against the validity of race as an analytic category are certainly not lacking. As discussion and case-in-point, see Rebecca Tuvel, “In Defense of Transracialism,” *Hypatia* 32 (2017): 263-78, and the symposium about that article’s repudiation by *Hypatia*’s editorial board in *Philosophy Today* 62.1 (Winter 2018).



of comparison deemed permissible or not by different publics—reveals the structure of areas of discourse.

Under the name “the new Qing Imperial history,” a number of historians, largely but not solely working in the United States, have drawn parallels between the methods of conquest and stabilization used by the China-based Qing or Manchu dynasty (1644-1911) and those used by the British in India and North America, the Russians in Siberia and the Caucasus, and the Spanish in the New World. Comparison reveals similarities (known or unknown to the participants at the time) among these empires’ military strategies, financial management, religious and cultural interventions, patterns of settlement and land distribution, population control, communications, and so forth, alongside the inevitable differences, for these were empires with distinct heritages operating under conditions that could be vastly dissimilar. The work of Evelyn Rawski, James Millward, Mark Elliott, and Peter Perdue, informed by this comparative approach, teaches us a great deal about what it was to be an empire in the era of cavalry and wooden ships. The Manchus, originally a nomadic people from the steppes north of densely urbanized and intensively farmed China, broke through the Ming Dynasty’s defenses at a moment of civil war and rapidly laid claim to that rich empire whose subjects had come to think of themselves as belonging, by and large, to a single ethnic and cultural group with a shared set of norms and institutions knitting together the remotest townships in relationships with the center. Not content with consolidating their rule over the former Ming domain, the Manchus exploited their existing familial, cultural, and religious affinity with Mongols and Tibetans to extend a variable degree of dominance, ranging from alliances to protectorates, over an area of sparsely settled deserts, oases, and uplands roughly equivalent in size to the provinces of Ming China. Where the alliances frayed, the Qing sent in troops, and in a series of wars in the middle and late eighteenth century conquered and resettled Central Asian lands previously held by Zunghars, Uyghurs, and Turkestanis

(with whom the Manchus had no historical ties).<sup>2</sup> Conquest and resettlement are basic components of any imperial history. It should surprise no one that the Kangxi and Qianlong emperors, when they could, expanded their domains. Integral to the process were, as well, bloody extermination campaigns and forced migrations. Notably, it is historians able to use sources written in Manchu who have chronicled these events and pieced together the rationale behind the larger geopolitical strategy of the Qing, hence the label “New Qing Imperial History”—new in that it relies on documents not previously exploited and treats this early-modern empire otherwise than as just one of the traditional 25 Chinese dynasties. The themes of conquest, non-Chinese ethnicity, and strategies of imperial display seem to have hit a nerve among Chinese historians, some of whom have written to denounce the whole school of thought as an American campaign of denigration against China. To compare the Qing dynasty with the Romanov or Ottoman dynasties, let alone the British or French architects of empire, is according to this critique to “view the history of China from an imperialist standpoint, with imperialist points of view and imperialist eyes, regarding ‘traditional’ China as an ‘empire,’ regarding the Qing dynasty as ‘Qing dynasty imperialism’[...]. The ‘New Qing History’ is academically absurd, and politically does damage to the unity of China.”<sup>3</sup> The last clause shows

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- 2 See James A. Millward, *Beyond the Pass: Economy, Ethnicity and Empire in Qing Central Asia, 1759-1864* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998); James A. Millward, Ruth W. Dunnell, Mark C. Elliott, and Philippe Forêt, eds., *New Qing Imperial History: The Making of Inner Asian Empire at Qing Chengde* (London: Routledge-Curzon, 2004); Peter C. Perdue, *China Marches West: The Qing Conquest of Central Eurasia* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2005). A lecture by Evelyn Rawski, then President of the Association of Asian Studies, touched off the controversy about the degree to which the Manchu rulers were or were not “Chinese” and how to evaluate their “Chineseness”: see Rawski, “Presidential Address. Reenvisioning the Qing: The Significance of the Qing Period in Chinese History,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 55 (1996): 829-950, and the rejoinder by Ping-Ti Ho, “In Defense of Sinicization: A Rebuttal of Evelyn Rawski’s ‘Reenvisioning the Qing,’” *Journal of Asian Studies* 57 (1998): 123-55.
- 3 Li Zhiting, “Xuezhe ping ‘Xin Qing shi’: ‘Xindiguo zhuyi’ shixue biaoben” (Scholars Assess the “New Qing History”: A Specimen of Neoimperialistic Historiography), *Zhongguo shehui kexue wang* (20 April 2015), available at <http://www.cssn.cn/zx/>

where the hurt of comparison lies. Scholars in China are explicitly forbidden by current national-security law to raise the question of territorial unity. Discussing the events that led to the Western provinces and Tibet being acquired by the Qing dynasty offends against the article of faith proclaiming that those territories “have always been Chinese” and must always be so.<sup>4</sup> Worse yet, Uyghurs and Tibetans who “have always been Chinese” might begin, if they read such histories, to think of themselves as forcibly incorporated imperial subjects of recent date. Since every schoolchild knows that China has always and only been the victim of imperial aggression, and never conducted imperial wars of its own, Qing history must obviously be held aloof from the dangers of such comparison.<sup>5</sup> Thus not rationally, but by *raison d'état*, scholars living under Chinese jurisdictions are forbidden from exploring analogies potentially relevant to understanding the growth of Qing empire, and thus (is there any need to say it?) the world we live in today. Their site is simply their situation.

Less peremptorily, fields of study are often constituted around a particularly prestigious example, the implications of which rule out other potentially informative examples. A case in point is postcolonial studies, for which the British Empire and, secondarily, the French overseas possessions serve as the model cases and the contemporary American network of directly and indirectly controlled territories the implied analogon.<sup>6</sup> Relatively few publications in this field venture

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201504/t20150420\_1592588.shtml (accessed June 28, 2017); partial translation in David Bandurski, “A Righteous View of History,” *China Media Project* (22 April 2015), available at <http://chinamediaproject.org/2015/04/22/a-righteous-view-of-history/> (accessed June 28, 2017).

4 On the heritage of nationalistic historiography in both Chinese and Russian official scholarship on the region, see Perdue, *China Marches West*, pp. 506-17.

5 For a typical instance of these oft-repeated half-truths, see Meng Xiangqing, “China Dream Includes Strong PLA,” *China Daily* (8 October 2013), available at [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/opinion/2013-10/08/content\\_17012886\\_2.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/opinion/2013-10/08/content_17012886_2.htm) (accessed October 19, 2018).

6 Cf. Derek Gregory, *The Colonial Present: Afghanistan, Palestine, Iraq* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), as cited in Stoler, “Preface,” *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power*, pp. x, xx, xxvi. When current international tensions determine what is to be studied

into the history or culture of the Spanish or Portuguese empires, the Russian, Ottoman, or Chinese empires, not to mention the Moghul, Persian, Tibetan, Babylonian, Aztec, and other histories that fill the worldwide record of humanity. (Historians and archaeologists attend to them, of course; they just do not do so under the label “postcolonial.”) Specialists have noted “a persistent undertone in the literature that the only *true* forms of colonialism were European ones. All others—be they Chinese, Japanese, or Russian—the argument seemed to be, were not so much derivative of these forms but set aside as different from them.”<sup>7</sup> Inasmuch as the Chinese and Russian empires predate the “*true* [...] European ones,” the suggested characterizations of them as either “derivative” or “different” indicates a deep unwillingness to read the record. Just as with the worrying comparisons to the paradigmatic genocide, here a leading example influences what will count as being within and without a field to such an extent that many broader questions about what “empire” and “colony” are *in general* become hard to frame. How far does the category of “empire in general” extend? What are its requisites? Does it become meaningless when comparison strays too far from the canonical cases? Is there perhaps in the prominence accorded to the British in the Caribbean, India, and Africa a concern that extending the range of examples will dilute the moral urgency of anti-imperialism? Or that empire will become just another thing that happens, no matter by whom and how?

The nation, with its coordinated claims on citizenship, language, economy, and culture, so imposes itself on our minds that it may seem

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and compared under the heading of “empire,” the search for a usable past, as Van Wyck Brooks called it, begins with representations of the present. Attempting to take a segment of the past on its own terms is not “antiquarianism” (notoriously trivialized by Nietzsche in “Vom Nutzen und Nachteil der Historie für das Leben”) but a questioning of the agenda-setting representations of the present and thus a chance to learn from the past something other than what we put into it.

7 Carole McGranahan and Ann Laura Stoler, “Preface,” ix-xii in Ann Laura Stoler, Carole McGranahan, and Peter C. Perdue, eds., *Imperial Formations* (Santa Fe: School for Advanced Research Press, 2007), p. x. The collection is directed against this consensus.

the natural unit for historical comparisons. But empires tell us that it is not so. Empires break nations and recombine them. Nations' independence from one empire, once gained, may break them again. Some entities currently registered as nations are the remains of former empires. Cooper and Bradbury's broad survey of *Empires in World History* corrects the view that the nation is the antidote to imperial dominance. The relation is rather part-to-part and interactive. "Empires do not grow out of whole peoples who set out to dominate other whole peoples. The Ottoman empire was not specifically Turkish, the Habsburg not specifically Spanish. In both cases society was reshaped by the process of empire-building."<sup>8</sup> At the scale where these historians operate, no one paradigmatic instance leads the investigation into empire. Rather, recurrent devices, variously combined, enable actors to imperialize. Empires develop similar strategies, learn from one another, take over a previous empire's base of operation even down to the language of official communication, which may be native to neither governors nor governed. There is on the one hand an accumulated "toolkit" of methods—the "repertoires of imperial power"—and on the other the many historical deployments of that ensemble. "One might call the European empire-builders of the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries the Mongols of the sea—their advantage was in mobility, the ability to concentrate resources, and military technology adapted to a particular situation. They moved in where they could and avoided areas where the barriers were high."<sup>9</sup> The historians have learned from this mobility. Moreover, their eclecticism is framed by an awareness of the temptation of "reading history backwards" and falsely generating necessary truths out of mere opportunistic successes.<sup>10</sup> A broadly comparative history can accommodate neither singularity nor teleology. Its attention is drawn to preexisting conditions and the junctures that crystal-

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8 Frederick Cooper and Jane Burbank, *Empires in World History: Power and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), p. 119.

9 Cooper and Burbank, *Empires in World History*, pp. 180, 151.

10 "It is only by reading history backwards that the story of the British empire appears as the inevitable triumph of a British way of making empire or doing capitalism." Cooper and Burbank, *Empires in World History*, p. 170.

lize them into patterns resistant to analysis only so long as the same conditions continue in force. A longer history, a bigger geography, will remind us of the dozens of empires that have come and gone on the face of the earth—empires organized in various ways, on many scales, empires on land and sea, on a spectrum running from genocidal plot to informal cooperative agreement, empires more or less contested by their subject populations, administered with more or less violence or wisdom, eventually subverted from within or invaded from the outside, but having the shared feature of a communitarian division between ruling and ruled populations, this division sometimes made tangible by differences of language, sometimes of habitat, sometimes of education or religion, sometimes of skin color, sometimes of dietary or aesthetic practices; in any event, *some* differences that invite comparison. Every empire compares; this is a tautological statement, inasmuch as every empire deals with difference; but the range of variety in the examples precludes rigorous or ostensive definition and calls for the “family resemblance” or “Lego set” model.<sup>11</sup>

Detienne’s program of “experimenting,” too, works through family resemblance rather than essential or defining properties. Comparison will be achieved not by putting whole cultures or institutions side-by-side but by breaking the narratives transmitted by national histories down into such components as the dealer in anthropological comparisons can sort and recombine. Breaking and recombining, that is the price of commensurability. Everyone’s idols must be melted down.

The three comparative sub-programs in Detienne’s manifesto, “acts of founding,” “practices of democracy,” and “the realm of polytheisms,” were chosen, one surmises, partly on accidental, empirical grounds, but nonetheless reflect obsessions of the Hellenist community to which Detienne primarily addresses himself: communitarian identity (and colonization); the emergence of democracy; and political theology. Not content to break them down, Detienne’s group redistributes the spoils. It is important, for iconoclastic purposes, to demonstrate that the elements

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11 On “family resemblance” versus rigid categorization, see Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1953), pars. 66–68.

of these traditional Greco-Roman idea-complexes are found elsewhere, in Japan, India, Senegal, or Peru; that their specific combination is optional, not obligatory; and that the elements by no means imply one another by inner necessity, but emerge in the wake of specific historical constraints.

Detienne is, of course, operating as a critic of claims of cultural uniqueness. But to take the decentering one step farther, we might ask questions about civilizational complexes in which other themes and mechanisms dominate. It is good to start with alien proxies for Athenian democracy, that Incomparable which Detienne stubbornly subjects to comparative analysis, but is the priority placed on the effort to reverse a Eurocentric idol not a concession, in its way, to Eurocentrism? Could not other comparables be taken as starting points, comparables without such prominence in the standard origin-stories derived from Greece, Rome, and company?

We might for example take up our comparative study from the duo of ruler and minister, a political formula essential to most early Chinese writing about political order, which allows through its many quasi-historical permutations the development of a many-sided philosophy of enlightened rule, whether Daoist, Legalist, Mohist, or Confucian. We see in the encyclopedic legends of early China the wise minister substituting for the disabled sovereign, the wise minister rejected by the headstrong king, the minister who refuses to serve, the king who will not take no for an answer, the king who abdicates in favor of the minister, legitimation crises provoked by the revolt of subordinates, and, of course, emollient discourses tending to show that each of these developments was necessary and beneficial in the long run. The motif-group holds through myth, legend, ritual, and history.<sup>12</sup> Even without exit-

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12 For representative analyses of these motifs in a comparative framework, see Michael Puett, *The Ambivalence of Creation: Debates Concerning Innovation and Artifice in Early China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001); Yuri Pines, "Friends or Foes: Changing Concepts of Ruler-Minister Relations and the Notion of Loyalty in Pre-Imperial China," *Monumenta Serica* 50 (2002): 35-74; Mark Edward Lewis, *The Flood Myths of Early China* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006).

ing the envelope of Chinese culture, we are within our rights to ask: What are the components of the ruler-minister duo, what are its consequences, how does it write itself large in institutions or fall apart when the protagonists behave in unsanctioned ways? How deeply is the Chinese empire, as an ideological and practical formation, imprinted by an imagination of kingship divided into advisory and executive functions? And going farther afield, how would the same duality, as intensively theorized by ancient Chinese thinkers, help us understand European, Mesopotamian, or Mesoamerican texts? Here the comparison is activated by one classic formation to which we may or may not find that anything in European myth or history quite answers, or corresponds with equal prominence. To recenter comparison in this way is, inasmuch as we break with long-held habits, to decenter it.

Indeed, if we look at Europe with Chinese history as our standard, we will find ourselves asking questions that Europeans did not usually ask of themselves. The task is not to compare Europe *and* China, but to compare Europe *to* China, on Chinese terms. Why is the transmission of the Europeans' so-called Classics so often interrupted, so fragmentary and so biased? Why are their languages so provincial in space and time? Why is the literary canon so sparse, heterogeneous, and unstable? Why do they have so few institutions that hold up for more than a few hundred years? Why did they not set up a proper examination system or civil service until a thousand or so years after the principle had been demonstrated to succeed in China? How did specialists in the supernatural come to wield such unregulated power for so long? After a few decades spent in the company of Chinese books, it seems normal to me to be Chinese, and exotic to be European; to be American, downright improbable. Which is not to say that "normal" stops comparison from happening.





## Near and Far

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Victor Segalen—China scholar, poet, novelist, art historian—puts a classically inept comparative analysis in the mouth of the businessman and habitué of consulates who is the narrator of his novel *René Leys*. On October 11, 1911, receiving news of a rebellion in the South, the narrator goes excitedly to his friend, the title character, to learn what the Qing government's response will be. René Leys, supposedly on intimate terms with the imperial inner circle, is dismissive. The narrator accepts his indifference as a proof of the dynasty's sublimely assured control, and reflects in his diary:

Why indeed should I have been so bothered by this exotic Sun Yat-sen, as much a “negro” for the impassive Chinese of the Wei River Valley or the pallid Manchurian conqueror as would be a Wolof-Arab half-caste raising hell in Dakar, when the imperial power is enthroned at Dunkirk and wears a Norwegian face!<sup>1</sup>

Trying to understand China as another Europe (plus colonies), Segalen's narrator maps onto it the features of his familiar world: the pale-skinned peoples of the North have wealth, military might, and cultural authority; and the South is full of darkish, mongrel, rebellious but ultimately inconsequential “negroes.” The first irony to be lost on this narrator is the fact that the “exotic” Sun (a Cantonese-speaker

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<sup>1</sup> Victor Segalen, *René Leys* (Paris: Crès, 1922), pp. 209-10. Segalen's writing is through-and-through comparative, but his main contribution to comparative theory is *Essai sur l'exotisme: Une esthétique du divers* (written 1904-18, first published in 1955; reprinted, Paris: Fata Morgana, 1978).

long resident in Honolulu) and his associates will in a matter of days overthrow the vast and venerable Qing empire. The second is that China is not organized like Europe at all: the Frenchman's projection of the salient features of empire (for him, a racial pecking order that correlates with latitude and wealth) gets wrong such features of Chinese regionalism as the effects of centuries of internal migration, the concentration of wealth in the southern cities, the ladder of promotion through the nationwide examination system, and efforts by the imperial center in every age to scatter the accumulation of riches and influence by aristocratic families. There is inequality in China, only not the racial-regional kind that the Frenchman is primed to recognize. The translation yields a singularly stupid political analysis.

Segalen's novel is an unusual double "unreliable narrator" game: the narrator, who understands nothing, is throughout strung along by the title character, a pathological liar with self-aggrandizing tendencies and a gift for languages. All this happens against the background of the Qing-era Forbidden City, universally thought to be a dark wood of puzzles and mysteries. In this passage, at least, the message to be read seems clear: the truth is the opposite of what the narrator thinks. Unlike the French republic-cum-empire, the Chinese empire does collect its provinces into one continuous body, with many perceptible differences being politically insignificant or even compensated for. Among historical figures mentioned in the novel, the reformist leader of 1898, Kang Youwei, rose from a middling Cantonese town to hold the empire's highest offices; the general, later president and then briefly self-designated emperor Yuan Shikai came from Hunan; Sun Yat-sen's backers were, like him, southern merchants and emigrants. Being from the South or Center was no barrier to social ascent.

Like the United States, China has a large number of identified minority groups and a vast group that does not think of itself as being "marked," as the linguists say, but rather as the mainstream: as "Chinese," or if relevant as "Han Chinese." "The Han Chinese constitute more than 90% of China's population and nearly a fifth of the human

species.<sup>2</sup> One can live as “Han Chinese” for all intents and purposes while remaining aware of one’s family origins as Manchu, Muslim, Miao, and so forth; most of the minorities of China are not visibly distinct from the majority population, and surnames, clothing, region of residence and the like do not serve as reliable proxies for ethnic identity. Except in the application of certain policies (like the now-defunct one-child rule), ethnicity plays a minor role in daily life for most people. The analogous category in American life would be “white,” an umbrella identity covering many pasts (English, Irish, German, Slovak, Italian, Greek, Swedish, and so on) and a range of phenotypes. Whiteness is *unmarked* (the default option) in America in the sense that one rarely hears of a banker, a poet, or an engineer described as a white banker, poet, or engineer, but an article about a notable Black, Chicano, Asian, etc., banker, poet, or engineer would be far more likely to include overt mention of ethnicity (and, with some variation depending on fields of activity, gender).<sup>3</sup> Except where ethnicity affects the application of certain policies, “Chinese” in China may for the most part be assumed to be equivalent to “Han Chinese.” This is not to discount casual folk prejudice against certain descent groups, accents, and regional origins; still, an assumption of uniformity in customs, family structures, lifestyle, relation to the law, citizenship, and so forth prevails. And as elsewhere, this uniformity among the unmarked population results from long-term broad historical processes of assimilation (much longer-term than in the US case). Assimilation, integration, or sinification resulted from the expansion of a particular cultural and ethnic group, retrospectively known as the Huaxia, and their subsequently recruited congeners over some three thousand years of history from their places of origin to other areas of what is now China.

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2 Jieming Chen et al., “Genetic Structure of the Han Chinese Population Revealed by Genome-wide SNP Variation,” *American Journal of Human Genetics* 85 (2009): 775-85.

3 On the Jakobsonian concept of markedness, see Linda R. Waugh, “Marked and Unmarked: A Choice Between Unequals,” *Semiotica* 38 (1982): 299-318. On the limits of analogies between Han-ness and whiteness as categories, see Susan D. Blum, *Portraits of ‘Primitives’: Ordering Human Kinds in the Chinese Nation* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001), pp. 57-59.

*Cultural and ethnic*, because integral to Huaxia cultural norms were rules about marriage, naming, place of residence, style of subsistence and the like: these had secondary effects on the biology of the population (who was born into what sorts of family, having what kinds of relations to other lineages and groups) as well as their consciousness (morals, relation to the state, aptitude for military service or competition for official rank, and so forth). Ethos and ethnos are intertwined. One often hears that participation in Chinese culture makes one (or one's descendants) Chinese. As Mencius put it in about 300 BCE, "[The legendary culture-hero] Shun was born in Zhufeng, went to live in Fuxia, and died in Mingtiao—a man of the Eastern Yi [tribes]. [The founder of the Zhou Dynasty] King Wen was born near Mount Qi in the Zhou territory and died in Biying—a man of the Western Yi [tribes]".<sup>4</sup> Despite their alien origins, says Mencius, both Shun and Wen became sage-kings and founders of Chinese civilization. Mencius's argument for culture, not race, as the defining feature of Chineseness may have been an innovation in his time (this is debated), but its acceptance certainly kept Han identity open to new entrants.

The success of this long-term process of assimilation may be seen in what Chen et al. call "a continuous gradient" of population variance from north to south, "instead of distinct subpopulation clusters."<sup>5</sup> People whose remote ancestors may have known themselves as Yi, Yue, or some other rival to the Huaxia lost the sense of difference following the expansions, violent or peaceful as might be the case, that enlarged the empire. As with whiteness in America, there were advantages to being Han. But an unmarked identity conceals a forgotten one. It is a long

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4 Mencius, 4b29. The word *yi* was often translated "barbarian" and even put under diplomatic taboo in the era of strife between imperial China and expansionist Western powers. See Lydia Liu, *The Clash of Empires: The Invention of China in Modern World Making* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004), pp. 32-42. On models of Chinese ethnicity as open or closed, cultural or genetic, see Yuri Pines, "Beasts or Humans: Pre-Imperial Origins of the 'Sino-Barbarian' Dichotomy," 59-102 in Reuven Amitai and Michal Biran, eds., *Mongols, Turks, and Others: Eurasian Nomads and the Sedentary World* (Leiden: Brill, 2005).

5 Chen et al., "Genetic Structure of the Han Chinese," p. 781.

time since the Yue or Dong Yi raised their collective heads, and there is no reason for them to do so now, but one should remember that not all of China was always Han. Nor, today, do all citizens of China identify as “Chinese.”

In any society that prides itself on assimilation, the unmarked identity is the strong one, the identity that is precisely not a particular identity but tends to present itself as universal and normative. And if social promotion erases the mark of difference, it is easy to think of the mark of difference as a badge of inferiority. Yet some marked identities remain as lumps in the melting pots of any culture. Around them develop areas of difficulty, of non-universality, of semantic restriction (the “rights of woman” being, for example, long treated as an optional coda to the universal and aspirational “rights of man”; “hyphenated identities” being inherently suspicious). A transition to unmarked status may be legally required yet not completed in the minds of all: thus from a legal point of view, once “gay marriage” has been signed into law it is simply “marriage”; but a great many people refuse to recognize that non-difference. Or the naturalized citizen, legally a full participant in citizenship, may be required to show her identity card more often than the native-born, and have to listen to strangers and politicians suggesting that she “go back where she came from.” The asymmetry of marked and unmarked designations makes it seem as if the unmarked have the right to demand compliance and integration from the marked, those people who “stick out” in some way. The marked are always being compared with the norm. Comparison rarely breaks in on the tranquility of the unmarked.<sup>6</sup>

Assimilation is the acquisition of an unmarked identity. But assimilation—or even a cultural form of integration—did not happen on its own, in China as elsewhere. Consider these passages from a Ming-dynasty encyclopedia of statecraft, the *Daxue yanyi bu* (*Supplement to an Expansive Commentary on the “Great Learning”*) by Qiu Jun (1421-95). Address-

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6 Thus Wayne Brekhus, “A Sociology of the Unmarked: Redirecting Our Focus,” *Sociological Theory* 16 (1998): 34-51, recommends “reverse marking” the ordinary and the conventional as a way to “deghettoize the marked” (pp. 43-44, 48).

ing his sovereign throughout, Qiu Jun compiles an operating manual for the empire. He writes a century or so after the reconquest of China from the Yuan (Mongol) dynasty, so spreading Chineseness is very much his concern. In one chapter he takes up the emperor's responsibility to "broaden moral teaching in order to change customs", in the words of the chapter's title. Why is teaching necessary at all?

I note: Governing is the ruler's business. That which makes government necessary is the people. The one who puts into practice the ruler's policies and brings the people into conformity with them is the official. Governing comes down to two principles: administering and teaching. [...] Although the root of teaching is found [...] in the sovereign [...] yet just as the earth does not consist in one quarter only, but includes distant regions that are hard of access, so too humanity is not all of one kind, but includes remote and diverse groups that are hard to understand. For this reason, when a wise ruler comes to occupy the throne, he knows that moral transformation is the most urgent task of governing. [...] This is the basis on which the world can be made peaceful; everything else is a consequence of it.<sup>7</sup>

Qiu Jun is no anarchist. The people are raw material, recalcitrant and unruly. The ruler must work on them through the official, his designated instrument, managing sustenance, rewards and punishments, and dispensing doctrine. "Remote and diverse" groups have not been worked over by emperors and officials for as long, so they will require more energetic "transformation" than those close to home; this is self-evident to Qiu.

The common people, being common people, include those of greater and lesser attainment, as well as good and bad elements. The accomplished shall be given marks of distinction, in order to separate them from the unaccomplished. The unaccomplished should also be

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7 Qiu Jun, *Daxue yanyi bu*, juan 82, item 31d, in *Wenyuange Siku quanshu* (The Complete Collection of Books in Four Categories, Manuscript Kept in the Tower of Literary Profundity). I have used the version posted online at [www.ctext.org](http://www.ctext.org): <https://ctext.org/library.pl?if=gb&res=6336> (accessed June 23, 2015).

marked with distinctions, in order that they shall not mix with the accomplished. With these distinctions in place, one can encourage those with a potential for becoming good and bring them into service, while the inferior ones can know the basis for shame and praise, so that they too will improve themselves and become good: this is what is called “advancing the good and inducing the rest to follow.”<sup>8</sup>

The official must contend with cultural diversity in several forms: level of education (or indoctrination), ethnicity, religion, etc. Ideally, none of these forms of diversity should exist. They are not valuable for themselves. Working on this population, the official distributes “marks” of approval and disapproval. The random diversity of the pre-transformation populace now sorts into two definite groups, the “accomplished” (that is, those who conform to the official’s standards for learning and behavior) and the “less accomplished.” The accomplished will be put on the path to success and visibility, the less accomplished left as they are.

The double difference drawn in the Ming official’s sententious prose amounts to an equivalence between two types of differentiating comparison. Comparison happens on both territorial and conceptual grounds, these being reconciled by the identification of the center with the norm. There are those who can be taught and those who cannot; and there are those who are close to the throne, easier to teach, and those who are farther away, harder to teach. Qiu Jun offers remedies for both kinds of imperfection: reforming character and suppressing bad customs. In this way the empire is maintained and extended by officials carrying out the ruler’s will (for, as Qiu Jun observes, the ruler cannot be everywhere simultaneously). A few examples taken from history illustrate Qiu Jun’s concerns:

Under the Song Dynasty, when Han Qi [1008-75] was in charge of Bingzhou [i.e., Taiyuan in Shanxi province], the customs east of the river were a mixture of Jiang and Yi ways. They cremated their dead. Qi had a field purchased and ordered a stele to be inscribed with a

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8 Qiu Jun, *Daxue yanyi bu*, juan 82, item 2d.



proclamation, ordering people to bring their dead to be buried there. From that point, to cremate the dead was considered a shame.

I note: In ancient times China did not know the custom of burning corpses. It came from the Western Regions with the Buddha. For a son to tolerate his parent's body and spirit to be thrown onto a flaming pyre is the ultimate lack of filiality. As magistrate, Qi had the power to forbid it. Today this practice still exists among the people, but it is not something that orders and punishments are powerless to stop. I request an order subjecting all persons who break the law against physical destruction of their parents to legal prosecution, and those who light the fires should be liable as well: this will be a sign of respect for filiality and of honor for reformed customs.<sup>9</sup>

Feng Hui of the Later Wei became Reminder of Anzhou [Hebei province], where the mountaineers were extremely unrefined. Fathers, sons and traveling strangers all slept in one room. Hui got off his horse and urged them to find separate places. Their custom changed instantly.

I note: This is still the custom today in the Yellow River Valley [Henan province], where the people have been contaminated by Jurchen and Mongol habits. They still sleep on a single heated brick bed. The job of transforming them is a big one. This behavior should be strenuously prohibited.<sup>10</sup>

Consider the territory of China a communications network. As (in another culture) all roads lead to Rome, so here, all ways are meant to lead to the Way laid down by the sages and presently enforced by the sovereign. The local official is a relay in this communications system. He observes, compares, and corrects. Qiu Jun's readiness to see in the population a raw material for transformation imprints on them a primary difference which it is the task of every official to reduce as far as

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<sup>9</sup> Qiu Jun, *Daxue yanyi bu*, juan 82, item 26.

<sup>10</sup> Qiu Jun, *Daxue yanyi bu*, juan 82, item 20.

possible. Thousands of such officials correcting the behavior of the people they administer, “advancing the good and inducing the rest to follow,” should eventually cause the whole population to lose their marks of faulty behavior, their Jiang, Yi, Buddhist, Mongol, selfish, criminal, or other untoward customs. The message sent out from the center will one day be relayed back with perfect fidelity, unmarked, self-transparent. That is Qiu Jun’s educational utopia. I see no difference with classic colonial pedagogy. Is it more than a technicality that in his manual rulers and ruled are (becoming) members of the “same” state? Before the invasions and campaigns that gave the New Qing History its object, the Ming were energetically reforming away the alien qualities, inborn or acquired, of their subjects. Of such conversions are unmarked majorities made.

As “empire” has become a term of abuse, considerations of national honor preclude applying it to one’s own polity: Detienne’s “incomparable” again. But let us risk a parallel. Wherein lies the main difference between a fairly successful empire, like China, and repudiated ones like those of France, Great Britain, and Japan? It may lie, not in the methods, not in the populations, not in the geography, but in the results of the long-term effort to suppress and absorb opposition and thereby to secure the forgetfulness that alone can naturalize domination as belonging. “Forgetfulness, and I would even say historical error,” said Renan, “is an essential factor in the forming of a nation [...] No French citizen knows today if he is Burgundian, Alanian, Tayfal, or Visigoth.”<sup>11</sup> It is probably not an accident, but certainly convenient, that it be so. And it was neither an accident nor inconvenient that every inhabitant of French Algeria, Senegal, or Indochina knew exactly what tribe he or she belonged to.

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11 Ernest Renan, *Qu'est-ce qu'une nation?* (Paris: Calmann Lévy, 1882), pp. 7, 9.



## A Museum Without Walls for Walls Without a Museum

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Spurred by the imminent relocation of the Preussischer Kulturbesitz's ethnographic collections from suburban Dahlem to the Humboldt-Forum in central Berlin, a 2017-18 exhibition at the Bode-Museum bears the title "Unvergleichlich," or as the museum's English-language publicity materials call it, "Beyond Compare." The Bode-Museum, opened in 1904, houses Byzantine, medieval, Renaissance and baroque sculpture chiefly from Italy, Germany, and the Low Countries. "Unvergleichlich," an exhibit dispersed throughout the display of the its permanent collection, pairs sculptures from the Africa collections of the Ethnologisches Museum with Madonnas, saints, condottieri and mythological figures from Europe. The exhibition's organizers observe:

The act of comparing and identifying is [...] not neutral, but charged with socially defined prejudices, conventions, and constructions of history. It is also governed by the experiences of the individuals who draw the comparisons. Defining two things as similar or different is often related to power. The process of comparison is thus closely tied to questions of collection history, aesthetics, colonialism, and gender. The exhibition and the accompanying app will illuminate these themes from a variety of perspectives.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Introductory text posted at <https://www.smb.museum/museen-und-einrichtungen/bode-museum/ausstellungen/detail/unvergleichlich-kunst-aus-afrika-im-bode-museum.html> (accessed October 9, 2018); similar content is displayed as a wall text at the entry to the exhibition ("Kunst aus Afrika im Bode-Museum:

Viewers are thus invited to reflect on their “socially defined prejudices, conventions, and constructions of history.” As with every lesson plan, too obviously telegraphing the right answer may backfire. One imagines an appropriate exit survey, designed to identify the rare viewer whom the juxtaposition of African and European art objects will scandalize. I can almost see a leaflet in the following form:

Were the art objects exhibited together

comparable (1)

not comparable (2)?

If you answered “comparable,” please give the basis of your reasoning:

ethical (1.1)

aesthetic (1.2)

If you answered “not comparable,” please give the basis of your reasoning:

ethical (2.1)

aesthetic (2.2)

Those who find the combination of works acceptable on either ethical or aesthetic grounds (1) are the easy subjects for our investigation into comparability. The “ethical” option (1.1) connotes the need of any self-respecting modern European museum viewer or curator to honor the cosmopolitan principle of the dignity of all human beings and to

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Ausstellungstexte”). See also the catalogue by Julien Chapuis, Jonathan Fine and Paola Ivanov, *Unvergleichlich: Kunst aus Afrika im Bode-Museum* (Berlin: Staatliche Museen zu Berlin / Preußischer Kulturbesitz, 2017), esp. pp. 10–13. On the issues of cultural memory raised by the plan to move the ethnographic collections to the future Humboldt-Forum on the site formerly occupied by the Stadtschloss and then the Palast der Republik, see Thomas Thiemeyer, “Cosmopolitanizing Colonial Memories in Germany,” *Critical Inquiry* 45 (2019): 967–990. For a positive presentation of the new museum center, see Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz (collective author), *Das Humboldt-Forum im Berliner Schloss: Planungen, Prozesse, Perspektiven* (Berlin: Hirmer, 2013).

acknowledge the effects of centuries of colonial dominance (thus one “ought” as a good citizen to say that a Benin statue is as worthy of attention as a Bernini one, even if one is poorly equipped to name the fine points of one or the other, and although such recognition does little to repair the damage of conquest and underdevelopment); the “aesthetic” option (1.2) connotes the power ascribed to works of art since, say, Malraux’s *Museum Without Walls*, of transcending their contexts of production and speaking to everyone universally (thus one “ought” to be open to the art of all times, places and peoples, in order to be a genuine art lover). These are unproblematic assumptions; their diffusion shows how deeply the work of comparison has penetrated into the life of pluralistic societies. My guess is that, being thus informed by prior education, at least half the visitors would check the box marked “comparable” and then offer aesthetic or ethical grounds for doing so, perhaps with a 50-50 distribution but not much divergence in motive; overlap among the answers can also be expected, some visitors checking both. Those who find the works “not comparable” (2) will be more challenging to explain. Are they the marks so easily trolled by Chris Ofili’s Madonna adorned with elephant dung (probably a 2.1 response)?<sup>2</sup> Or are they the recalcitrant viewers for whom (2.2) African art is very fine in its place but will never rival the holiness, the beauty, the nobility of a Raphael Madonna, *vel sim.*? Will they, rather, have accepted the profound otherness of African art and learned to respect it as something they will never quite understand—a form of piety, or tact (2.1), that risks discounting the sensory and affective power of artworks and keeping the foreign culture at arm’s length? Or will they be the really difficult customers for whom African art can be fully meaningful only when its entire ritual and social context is preserved around it (2.1=2.2), and for whom the very institution of museums smacks of profanation? For this last group, display in a Berlin temple of the beautiful is no sign of acceptance and

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2 Andrew Russeth, “Chris Ofili’s ‘Holy Virgin Mary’ Goes to MoMA, A Gift from Steve Cohen,” *Artnews*, 18 April 2018, available at <http://www.artnews.com/2018/04/18/chris-ofilis-holy-virgin-mary-goes-moma-gift-steve-cohen/> (accessed October 8, 2018).

honor. They are not, like the obviously chauvinistic group, reluctant to accept the African works on their merits (merits which European audiences might require some retraining to appreciate), they come to the exhibit with different ideas of merit, of display, of recognition. Comparison will find dialogue with them the most difficult (and therefore most valuable), because this group has not accepted the protocols of cosmopolitan art or culture appreciation. In any case, the language of the museum's address to the public does not anticipate people with particularly restrictive cultural allegiances coming forward. It assumes that, if they have come to the museum at all, they have accomplished the transition into the state of would-be ethical and aesthetic cosmopolitans, of people for whom comparisons can be valid. Thus the exhibition's title, "Unvergleichlich," and its cover graphic (a collage of European and African sculptural faces, bisected, recombined, and covered over with an X in vandalistic, graffiti-inspired bright-pink ink) is a ventriloquized evocation of a scandal that, they may observe with satisfaction, is not real for them at all.

For me at least the rhetoric of the exhibit catalogue overstates the challenge. Few will deny, at least on the plane of expressed sentiments and good intentions, that African and European works of art are "comparable," in terms of aesthetic or human value, and few will hold that they are interchangeable. The catalogue thus rehearses a scandal that no one finds scandalous, in a good-natured game where we role-play our uncle from the countryside, the one who's not sure that Africans are capable of making art. But even in highlighting the differences in cultural prestige between the one and the other collection we might be overstating the case, for it appears that the African and Asian objects in the (Königliches) Museum für Völkerkunde endured the Nazi years and the war under relatively good conditions of preservation and appreciation. As far as I have been able to tell by consulting lists of personnel and exhibition materials, the objects of the Ethnological Museum were not even then used to illustrate the racial inferiority of their makers, nor were they displayed in significantly different ways after the Museum's directorship had passed in 1934 to Hermann Baumann, an NSDAP party member who had studied with Frobenius. The famous "En-

“Entartete Kunst” (“Degenerate Art”) traveling exhibit, made up of confiscated modernist artworks held to demonstrate the depravity of “Bolshevik” art movements, included many works containing images of black men and women, a thematic choice that the organizers took to demonstrate a falling-back into primitive states of mind, but these were by Max Beckmann, Ludwig Kirchner, Max Pechstein, Else Lasker-Schüler, Ottomar Starke...—no one whose work would have been eligible for display in an Ethnological Museum.<sup>3</sup> And there seems to have been little if no mutual exchange between the Ethnological Museum and its Dahlem neighbor, the Kaiser-Wilhelm-Institut für Race Science and Human Genetics, directed by Eugen Fischer, another of Baumann’s teachers, to whom goes the responsibility for (among other things) having hundreds of mixed-race offspring of German women and French colonial soldiers in the occupied Rhineland sterilized.<sup>4</sup> The works of African art, through all this, seem to have been maintained free of ignominy. To what this consideration is due I am not sure, but it is likely that the tradition of granting works of art (no matter how exotic) disinterested contemplation in an elevated setting sheltered these works from the more violent comparisons which filled Nazi posters, brochures, books, and newspapers. This said, the popular image of African art was libelous. One of the “Entartete Kunst” exhibit’s best-known advertising posters, by Rudolf Herrmann, indeed put an African sculpted head cheek by jowl with an exaggerated stereotype of the “Jew.”<sup>5</sup> But it is not clear that Herrmann

3 See Freie Universität Berlin, Database “Entartete Kunst,” available at [http://www.geschkult.fu-berlin.de/en/e/db\\_entart\\_kunst/index.html](http://www.geschkult.fu-berlin.de/en/e/db_entart_kunst/index.html) (accessed October 21, 2018).

4 See Hans-Walter Schmuhl, *The Kaiser Wilhelm Institute for Anthropology, Human Heredity, and Eugenics, 1927–1945: Crossing Boundaries* (Heidelberg: Springer, 2008), esp. pp. 224–25.

5 Poster from the Chemnitz, 1937, installation of “Entartete Kunst,” in the collection of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, reproduced at <https://collections.lacma.org/node/207913> (accessed October 24, 2018). However, in Thomas Thiemeyer’s assessment, the growth of ethnological museums at roughly the same time as museums of German history and art worked to “stabilize the self-image with a corresponding opposite”: Thiemeyer, “Kulturerbe als ‘Shared Heritage’? (!): Kolo-



had copied an actual African sculpture or consulted any ethnographic collections.

The catalogue of “Unvergleichlich” gives the works the best form of homage: detailed, perceptive analysis. But the installation does not quite overcome the character of a publicity stunt. Cosmopolitanism wins an easy victory, unchallenged. (Not that I am calling for a prejudiced response; there is plenty of racism to go around already.) But the African works are clearly guests in a European house. They are relatively few; they always appear paired with a European work, which suggests that their presence must always be specially motivated; each pairing is marked by stand-out colored didactic cards. Marked in the semiotic sense too: for is it not the essence of being unmarked to be at home in (one’s) world? The protective aura of cosmopolitanism which underwrites their presence seems designed to remind the viewer that equality and dignity in their modern philosophical form (chiefly Kantian) are notions often credited to the European Enlightenment—another house in which non-Europeans are not always made to feel at home. Does the exhibit celebrate its own success a bit too much?<sup>6</sup> The sweetness of concord is always threatening to turn over into the sourness of hypocrisy. Does one get to wear the title of cosmopolitan while staying where and as one was, or is a more demanding passage through otherness required?

The status of marked and unmarked are both thrown into prominence and somewhat destabilized by this exhibit. It is as if the Europeanness of the medieval statues, taken for granted in the ordinary course of days at the Bode-Museum, takes on a new, marked status by being invited to dance with the African statues. One had not noticed

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nialzeitliche Sammlungen und die Zukunft einer europäischen Idee,” *Merkur* 829 (2018): 30-44, p. 39.

6 I may be missing the point. It is possible that the exhibit is defensive in spirit—a preemptive rebuttal to arguments that the Humboldt-Forum can never get clear of the racist past of its predecessor institutions. See again Thiemeyer, “Cosmopolitanizing Colonial Memories in Germany,” and the website <http://www.berlin-postkolonial.de> (accessed October 24, 2018).

the polychrome skin, hair, and eyes in quite the same way, or the often off-balance stances of the European figures. Such characteristics no longer simply belong to the set of attributes that you expect to see in a room of sculptures at the Bode-Museum. The works from a number of different African kingdoms throw into relief a Euro-specificity. But the cosmopolitan aesthetic that has brought them together is not, itself, marked, because it has no answering aesthetic program from Africa or anywhere else; it is just a sort of necessary ethical and artistic background to the encounter. If, however, “Europe” is somehow being judged for its hospitality to art, ideas, and people from elsewhere—a pending case that the exhibition’s title “Unvergleichlich” pretends to answer in the negative while of course affirming it resoundingly—then “Europe” occupies two places in the scene of judgment, and such situations always raise the suspicion of self-dealing. The Klansman, too, wanted to be just one among many marked “races” in one part of his drama of self-presentation, and yet, in another part of that drama, also to occupy the consensual position vested with the authority to decide what is fair and normal. Unmarked whiteness, in that scene, would give marked whiteness a free pass. But can an identity legitimately figure both as framework and as object? Does not a conflict of interest vitiate the results? Something of Russell’s paradox (or Groucho’s) disturbs the serenity of judgment here.

Despite these equivocations, the “Unvergleichliche” exhibit does stage a break in the European exclusivity of the collection, a contrast whereby the unmarked begins to see that it might be marked. It tests universalism, even if it must do so through the device of the exception (in the terms of the hoary example: the Ethiopian whose teeth are white).<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> The example, brought forth by Aristotle in *Soph. El. (Sophistical Refutations)* 167a10, reappears in Thomas Aquinas, Duns Scotus, and Martin Luther: see Richard Cross, *The Metaphysics of the Incarnation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 195-204.



## Making Room

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With their “narcissism of small differences” and their quickness to assume the worst about each other (see the Greek debt crisis, Brexit, etc.), are today’s Europeans the right people to answer the call of Syrians or Africans escaping their broken countries? What are the chances of cosmopolitanism rising from what we might call (without apocalypticism, please) the ashes of Europe? In a parallel conundrum: inasmuch as religion divides what cosmopolitanism tries to bring together, how do we conceive of secularism in a way that does not presuppose the path taken by formerly Christian countries to get there?<sup>1</sup> These questions, bound up with comparability, commensurability, and justice, are not new. Between the end of the Second World War and the independence of Algeria, the question of post-colonial, post-racist justice threads its way through the work of Sartre, Fanon, and Lévi-Strauss. Through their mutual attacks, an awareness grows that the perspective from which to situate universalism and its discontents is missing.

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<sup>1</sup> See Talal Asad, Wendy Brown, Judith Butler, and Saba Mahmood, *Is Critique Secular? Blasphemy, Injury, and Free Speech* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013). A similar discussion about Enlightenment theories of equality and inherent human rights opposes historians who see Haiti’s independence struggle as the fulfillment of otherwise “truncated” ideals and those who find that a convenient alibi for false universalism. See Samuel Moyn, “On the Non-Globalization of Ideas,” 187–204 in Samuel Moyn and Andrew Sartori eds., *Global Intellectual History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013). In both cases the particular historical origin of a norm is opposed to its purported universal applicability and said to limit it.

It begins in the immediate postwar. Fascism is temporarily contained, but the Allies hang onto their colonies, an obvious contradiction. Looking forward to worldwide liberation from the constraints of race and class, Sartre in 1948 predicts the erasure of distinctions of color through the action of black poets, statesmen, workers, rebels:

The negro cannot deny that he is negro, nor can he claim that he is part of some abstract colorless humanity: he is black. Thus he has his back up against the wall of authenticity: having been insulted and formerly enslaved, he picks up the word “nigger” which was thrown at him like a stone, he draws himself erect and proudly proclaims himself a black man, face to face with white men. The unity which will come together, bringing all oppressed peoples together in the same struggle, must be preceded in the colonies by what I shall call the moment of separation or negativity: this anti-racist racism is the only road that will lead to the abolition of racial differences. How could it be otherwise?<sup>2</sup>

The negro [...] asserts his solidarity with the oppressed of every color. After that, the subjective, existential, ethnic notion of negritude “passes,” as Hegel says, into that which one has of the proletariat: objective, positive and precise. [...] In fact, Negritude appears as the unaccented beat [*le temps faible*] of a dialectical progression [...] But this negative moment is not sufficient in itself, and these black men who use it know this perfectly well; they know that it aims at preparing the synthesis or realization of the human being in a raceless society. Thus Negritude is *for* destroying itself; it is a “crossing to” and not an “arrival at,” a means and not an end.<sup>3</sup>

Sartre welcomed the soon-to-be-decolonized to the realization of history. But there was a price. Encouraged to instrumentalize, for a time, their difference from the white world that had oppressed them, the

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2 Jean-Paul Sartre, “Black Orpheus,” tr. John MacCombie, *The Massachusetts Review* 6 (1964): 13-52, p. 18. Original publication: “Orphée noir,” i-xlii in Léopold Sédar Senghor, ed., *Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie nègre et malgache de langue française* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1948).

3 Sartre, “Black Orpheus,” pp. 48-49.

black masses would, upon decolonization, melt into the (unmarked) international working class. For Frantz Fanon, this scenario of the future *Aufhebung* (dialectical sublation) of race implied the *Aufhebung* (cancellation) of his history and identity—a grimly negative reading that saw the cannibal qualities of Sartre’s Hegelian optimism. “When I read this page,” said Fanon in 1952, “I sensed that my last chance was being taken away from me.”<sup>4</sup> A little sacrifice is demanded for the sake of the world proletariat—very little, in the larger order of things—just an erasure of your markedness, which as we know is in the nature of a supplement to that regular order of things... But there is a “larger” or “regular” order of things only from a certain perspective, and Fanon will not go along with it. “I am not a possibility of something else, I am fully what I am. It is not incumbent on me to pursue the universal.”<sup>5</sup>

The next phase of the interchange, in 1961, shows Sartre admitting in a self-critique that Fanon was right. Reconciliation is off the table. Only violence can express the proper (non-)relation between colonizer and colonized.

[Africa’s] writers and its poets tried to explain to us that our values and the true facts of their lives did not hang together, and that they could neither reject them completely nor assimilate them. By and large, what they were saying was this: “You are making us into monstrosities; your humanism claims we are at one with the rest of humanity but your racism sets us apart.” [...]

When the peasant takes a gun in his hands, the old myths grow dim and the prohibitions are one by one forgotten. The rebel’s weapon is the proof of his humanity. For in the first days of the revolt you must kill: to shoot down a European is to kill two birds with one stone, to destroy an oppressor and the man he oppresses at the same time: there

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4 Frantz Fanon, *Peau noire, masques blancs* (Paris: Seuil, 1952), p. 108. Compare the dénouement of James Weldon Johnson’s novel *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1910; reprinted, New York: Library of America, 2009), whose biracial protagonist elects to disappear into the (unmarked) persona of “an ordinarily successful white man who has made a little money” (p. 127).

5 Fanon, *Peau noire, masques blancs*, p. 109.

remain a dead man, and a free man; the survivor, for the first time, feels a national soil under his foot.<sup>6</sup>

This newly-sensed “national soil” is the ground (no figure of speech!) of an exclusive category. Sartre could not, apparently, retract the either/or of his previous statement on negritude and human progress (the black man’s struggles are ultimately *either* for black people *or* for humanity in general). In 1961 he replays it: this time, it is not the black man who vanishes as such, but the European who must be eliminated. As the heroes of old Westerns used to say, “There ain’t room in this town for you and me.” He was thinking, of course, about the Algerian independence struggle, but the language closely parallels that which Kayibanda, at the same time, was using about his Tutsi co-nationals. That dead European would not be the last corpse, although Sartre was not concerned to look so far into the future.

But in 1948 it was the occupation of time, not turf, that was decisive. The vision of history as moving toward the one great struggle, absorbing into itself and obliterating the specific and thus lesser struggles of empirical individuals like Frantz Fanon, had communal backing. Almost a third of French voters had chosen the Communist ticket in 1946 and 1947, giving the PCF the largest score among all the parties. For a significant part of Sartre’s public, an exclusive, determinist and teleological conception of history was entirely acceptable.

In answer, the appeal to history was Claude Lévi-Strauss’s opening in 1962 for showing Sartre who was the more committed anticolonialist. Without mentioning Fanon (who certainly read Lévi-Strauss although it is not known if Lévi-Strauss read him), Lévi-Strauss points to Sartre’s notions of history and dialectical thought as the ultimate authorizations for the requirement for colonized peoples to check their identities at the door of progress. He finds Sartre’s *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (1960) resorting to analogies that would not have displeased the architects of European colonization.

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6 Jean-Paul Sartre, preface to Frantz Fanon, *Les damnés de la terre* (Paris: F. Maspero, 1961), pp. 7-8, 11.

It appears to [Sartre] even less admissible than it was to [Lucien] Lévy-Brühl [author of *Mental Functions in Inferior Societies*, 1910] that primitive man possesses “complex knowledge” and is capable of analysis and demonstration. About that aborigine from Ambrym, made famous by Deacon’s description, who expounded to a questioner the functioning of his society’s marriage rules and kinship system by tracing a diagram in the sand (no isolated ability, since the ethnographic literature contains many similar observations), Sartre affirms that “it is obvious that this construction is no act of thinking, but rather a manual execution regulated by a synthetic consciousness that he does not express” (*Critique de la raison dialectique*, p. 505). If we grant him this point, we will have to say the same of the professor at the École Polytechnique who demonstrates a proof on the blackboard. Any ethnographer with the knack of dialectical understanding will be sure that the situation is exactly the same in both cases.<sup>7</sup>

The faulty comparison that treats differently things that are “exactly the same,” that primes its conclusions for inequality, gets a stinging rebuke. A crude dualism of matter and thought is surely out of place in any epistemology that calls itself materialist, all the more when it has the result of positing the educated European as a self-aware subject of history and the primitive as a mere animal or machine repeating rote gestures in the sand. “History,” even the Marxist history of stages of class struggle leading up to the final liberation of humanity, looks very much like an ethnocentric Incomparable. For this reason, Lévi-Strauss finds in Sartre an exquisite document of “the mythology of our time.” By putting the aborigine and the engineering professor on the same plane (*La pensée sauvage* had begun with an opposition, better remembered through a thousand citations, between the “tinkerer” and the “engineer”), ethnography “reduces” the myths and icons of our society, correcting their self-centeredness; and so much the better, for its aim is “not to constitute the human, but to dissolve it.”<sup>8</sup>

7 Claude Lévi-Strauss, *La pensée sauvage* (Paris: Plon, 1962), p. 332.

8 Lévi-Strauss, *La pensée sauvage*, p. 326.



“Reducing” and “dissolving” sound like purely negative operations, and we are trained to be suspicious of “reductive” analogies. But inflated comparison is a vice too: so we see from Lévi-Strauss’s completion of the homology and his refusal to consider that the engineering professor does anything different *in kind* than the aboriginal informant. Did Sartre diminish the aborigine or inflate the professor? Which dynamic is at work will depend on one’s prior assessment of scale, an inherently controversial judgment from the moment one is addressing a non-homogeneous community; and comparison’s first task is to establish a common scale.

Because history as written by Europeans (even leftist ones) is dipped in the dye of progress, so that our own ancestors are unable to see eye-to-eye with us and “primitives” are only technically our contemporaries, something must replace history as our means of plotting our way through the world.<sup>9</sup> The violence of Sartrian time was to be replaced by the cognitive space of the lexicon, the array of classificatory systems that constitutes the basis of *La pensée sauvage*’s claim for the intellectual dignity of peoples without writing.

French structuralism is often accused of being a conspiracy against time. In this case its motives were honorable. Lévi-Strauss had experience with the inertia of institutions, even newly-founded ones like UNESCO, in coming to grips with the changes underway under decolonization.<sup>10</sup> The methods he took from linguistics (decomposing sequences, noting recurrences and exclusions, arranging elements along axes of similarity and difference) were universalist in the double sense of (a) being generally applicable, and (b) rejecting cultural hierarchies. They amounted to a morphology of culture (customs, narratives, artifacts, and so on). The evolutionary perspective dear to the later nineteenth

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9 For a classic statement of the problem of ethnocentrism and history, see Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979).

10 On Lévi-Strauss’s engagement with UNESCO in its early years, see Emmanuelle Loyer, *Claude Lévi-Strauss* (Paris: Flammarion, 2015), pp. 380-407.

century was excluded: *La pensée sauvage* would chart a path back to Cuvier, as it were.

*La pensée sauvage* is a work of cheerful reductionism. Reduction, for the Lévi-Strauss of 1962, is what comparative and interdisciplinary research is all about: “reintegrating culture into nature, and ultimately life into the totality of its physical and chemical conditions.”<sup>11</sup> But when attempting such a reduction of complex units into simpler ones, one should not expect the categories to remain imperturbably as they were at the outset. Guided by a proportional analogy (culture : nature :: life : matter) previously invoked in his disagreement with Sartre, Lévi-Strauss remarks that

we must anticipate that every reduction [of a part to a larger whole] will utterly reverse the preconceived idea that one might have had of the level—whatever it be—that one was aiming at. The idea of a comprehensive humanity, toward which ethnographic reduction leads, will have nothing in common with the idea one had of it beforehand. And when the day comes that we manage to understand life as a function of inert matter, we are sure to discover that the properties of matter are quite other than those we were accustomed to assign it.<sup>12</sup>

Whatever else Lévi-Strauss was doing in this sketch of the final consummation of the disciplines, he gives here a good account of the reflective comparison—the kind where the things compared cause a modification in the framework, categories, and criteria of comparison, and the comparer learns something.

Consider that ambitious sketch as a program of translation. Supposing that we were able to translate all true statements about culture into differently (and less provincially) true statements about nature,

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<sup>11</sup> Lévi-Strauss, *La pensée sauvage*, p. 327.

<sup>12</sup> Lévi-Strauss, *La pensée sauvage*, p. 327. “Reduction” may be ill-named; “integration” might have been more appropriate. Compare the use of “integration” as a name for the mapping of forms onto meanings in the roughly contemporary essay by Émile Benveniste, “Les niveaux de l’analyse linguistique,” in *Problèmes de linguistique générale* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966), pp. 127–31.

all true statements about life into true (and less vitalistically mystifying) statements about matter, all true statements about mental states into true (and experimentally grounded) statements about the brain: would this have meant that the language used to describe nature, matter, and the brain was unaffected, and simply waited in its majestic disciplinary self-assurance for the half-coherent subjective utterances to be disposed of by the translation-process, or would there necessarily be some push and pull whereby the meanings of the materialistic language took on new properties through their having accommodated the previous non-materialistic languages?<sup>13</sup> To see the translation of spirit into matter as one-way is to say that the person possessing the right language will never have anything more to learn. Those who look closely at the zones and events where spirit and matter meet have found repeatedly over the centuries that the neat boundaries break down as language warps to accommodate ambiguous observations.<sup>14</sup>

Sartre's 1948 schema made no room for Fanon as he was, or for Sartre to learn anything from the black poets that he did not already, as prophet of history, know; even after several meetings with Fanon, his 1961 daydream of anticolonial violence only dramatized the static character of his categories. Likewise, "history" as it can be imagined by a European thinker in the age of colonization will have only a tangential re-

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13 For the application of the model of translation to this problem, see Edgar Wilson, *The Mental as Physical* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979).

14 The antinomy between free will and determinism in Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* is well known. Common sense represents any gain in the power of determinism as a loss for free will and vice versa: such was the framing of Benjamin Libet's studies of decision sequences in *Mind Time: The Temporal Factor in Consciousness* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2005). A later examination of the problem reformulates voluntary action in terms of "capacity," "skills and cognitive functions that do not necessarily imply a continuous conscious control over the decision-making and action process": this amounts to redrawing the boundary as a zone of intermingling. See Andrea Lavazza, "Free Will and Neuroscience: From Explaining Freedom Away to New Ways of Operationalizing and Measuring It," *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience* 10 (2016), article 262, available at <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4887467/pdf/fnhum-10-00262.pdf> (accessed February 24, 2019).

lation to “history” as it will appear once colonized peoples take up their rightful position in it. And indeed the meaning of “history” has changed since 1962. Explorations of the rhetoric of history-writing, attempts to write “history from below,” returns to the archive, and a pluralization of communal memories and narratives leave only a few stubborn dogmatists and one-party states in a position to tell us what “history says.”<sup>15</sup> History now speaks in many tongues and guises, including conspiracy, counter-history and fan-fiction; its lessons are many and inconsistent. It should be obvious to us now that “history” and “humanity” should not have functioned as toll stations but as ongoing projects to which a young psychiatrist from Martinique had much to offer, “not only as a possibility of something else” but as he was.

That space should have offered a refuge from the exclusivism of time is understandable. But the earth (though big and round) is finite. Human attention is finite. Platforms for political representation are limited. A democratic and diverse culture must figure out how to *make room*. Lévi-Strauss’s imagined solution to the problem of making room for difference was to emulate the infinitely subdivisible architecture of human languages. Or of biological classification: botanists do not worry about running out of species names, they worry about the species going extinct before they can be catalogued. (See above, on the earth being finite.) The art of making room, in this sense of “room”, is not dependent on the beneficence of those already occupying space, who might accommodate the latecomers. Nor is it a matter of packing existing volumes more tightly. Making room for difference requires adding to the recognized dimensions when possible, and when not, imagining something better than either/or, zero-sum solutions. Pushing the others out is a strategy for societies that can allow only so much difference and

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15 For analyses of history as a form of writing, see for example Hayden White, *Metahistory* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973); Michel de Certeau, *L'Écriture de l'histoire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975); Frank Ankersmit, *Narrative Logic: A Semantic Analysis of the Historian's Language* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1983). In 1990, the Moscow high schools suspended the annual Russian history exam. There were too many versions of history circulating for the teachers to feel authorized to pass judgment on the papers (Olga Solovieva, personal recollection).

no more: societies that insist on robbing Peter to pay Paul, on making revenge the prototype of justice and sacrifice the condition of progress. One thing that comparison, particularly the reflective kind, can do is make alternatives appear. Out of two different things it makes a third, with no additional inputs of matter or energy. Trade-offs are the hallmark of the finite imagination, of a politics that rejoices in limits, in making people into winners and losers, in keeping things as they are. It is urgent in confronting such imaginaries that there be something to compare them with: only then can we paint a margin around world-pictures presented as irrefutable.

## Envoi

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Perhaps comparison is, as Karl Kraus said of psychoanalysis, “the mental illness that it claims to cure.”<sup>1</sup> But there is no going back. What is wrong with a misconceived or misleading comparison that a better comparison cannot put right? By “better” I mean: wider, more precisely formulated, attentive to more confounding factors or selection biases, able to withstand translation into more other languages, times or fields of reference. Among the preconditions of better comparison are such common-sense social goods as availability of information (in the case of literary comparison, this will require learning the necessary languages), unfettered debate, an assortment of rival definitions for key terms, and skilled interlocutors. I have collected the above instances of comparison in a comparative spirit, looking for examples of instructive failure or insight. Condemned to compare, living amid a polarized state of discourse that responds to every piece of news with an ideologically oppositely-charged piece of news, we can and must learn from such experiences as these how to design our experiments in comparison so as to cut Incomparables down to size, keep our categories reflexive, know which universe of comparison we are in moment by moment, anticipate discrepant audiences, be alert to collisions between example and framework, and set comparison’s implicit appeals to justice within the widest available bounds.

To do our comparing more wisely, less destructively, less invidiously, is a worthwhile aim. The skill that comparison gives us “not only to own,

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<sup>1</sup> “Psychoanalyse ist jene Geisteskrankheit, für deren Therapie sie sich hält.” Karl Kraus, *Nachts* (Leipzig: Kurt Wolff, 1918), p. 72.

but to feel the power of prejudices” is an epistemology and an ethics, and is never done with. But best practices and regulative ideas speak only to those who have already accepted the principle of guidance. The main usefulness of these recommendations then may be to offer means of challenging myopic or coercive comparisons, a challenge that, I think the examples have shown, is ever more necessary.

So: are we comparing yet?

## Acknowledgments

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Thanks are due Olga Solovieva, Ann Laura Stoler, Paul Farmer, Eric Hayot, Timothy Billings, Thomas Thiemeyer, and Walter Erhart for inspiring or refining parts of this discussion, sometimes through push-back. The text was improved by the suggestions of an anonymous referee and an able copy-editor. Errors of fact and appreciation are of course mine. I am grateful to the members of the SFB 1288 “Practices of Comparison” at Bielefeld, to the American Academy in Berlin, and to the Max-Planck-Institut für Wissenschaftsgeschichte for their generous hospitality, and especially to Yolande Korb, the Academy’s able librarian.



