



BOOK SYMPOSIUM

This is (not) like that

Matei CANDEA, *University of Cambridge*

Comment on van der Veer, Peter. 2016. *The value of comparison*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Ceteris paribus clauses are nice. They allow us the regularities and modularities we know are there while reminding us of the exceptions—fluctuations or deviations from a macroscopic order that point the way to a deeper understanding. This cognitive form (general pattern + exceptions) and its relatives (broad similarities + attendant differences, models + qualifications, etc.) are deeply anchored in the structure of our case-based organisation of knowledge: “This is like that (which you already know) but with the following differences.” It wears the micro-structure of cumulative learning on its face.

—William Wimsatt, Re-Engineering Philosophy for Limited Beings

One of the most engaging features of Peter van der Veer’s spirited argument for comparison is that it relies so centrally on showing, rather than telling. Despite its general-sounding title, this is not an abstract disquisition on the art of comparing but a hands-on, sleeves-rolled-up comparative experiment. This is apposite, since the theoretical argument represents a forceful assault on “abstract generalization” in the social sciences.

A second extremely engaging feature of this work is the way it relativizes the current anthropological obsession with comparisons of which one term is defined as an “us.”¹ For decades now, anthropological reflections on comparison have focused primarily on such us/them contrasts, in which “our own categories” are challenged by an encounter with alterity. With a few notable exceptions, anthropologists have tended to treat as an after-thought the seemingly more modest craft of

1. What I have elsewhere called “frontal comparisons” (Candea 2016).



building comparisons that travel sideways from one case to the next—“this is like that, but with the following differences.” True, van der Veer does invoke the widespread dictum that anthropological comparison ought to be first and foremost a way of reflecting on “our” concepts (van der Veer 2016: 28), which other anthropologists have expressed by saying that comparison is in the service of translation and not the other way round (Asad 1986; Viveiros de Castro 2004). But in practice, van der Veer’s book backgrounds this us/them dynamic by foregrounding multiple “lateral comparisons” between various aspects of life in China and India (Candea 2016). “Euroamerica,” as the occasional third term in these lateral comparisons, is more surely and more subtly decentered and provincialized (Chakrabarty 2007) than in many approaches that start from a head-on confrontation between “us” and “them.” This point rejoins the previous one: in this respect too, the strength of this book lies in its stepwise dynamic, its “transparticular” moves (Howe and Boyer 2016) from case to case, to case, to case. Never just particular, yet steering clear of a totalizing universality.

In one respect, however, the book is intensely “frontal,” and that is in dealing with other social scientists’ ways of comparing. The list of approaches to comparison in which van der Veer (2016) sees the specter of “generalism” is long: evolutionism and cognitive anthropology (2, 43), the concern with ontological alterity (5), the Geertzian penchant for generalization (27), the culture and personality school (31), the materialist reductionism of political economy (17), the Durkheimian method of generalization and classification (148), the tendency of Weberian arguments to essentialize cultural units (65–66), Dumont’s insufficient removal of generalism from his holism (34). In one way or another, in fact, most of the main approaches to comparison in the history of anthropology are critiqued here. From some of these, van der Veer seeks to retain the best parts, shorn of their egregious generalism. Others incur a wholesale dismissal. Van der Veer is both entertaining and convincing when launched full tilt against, for instance, Whitehouse and Cohen on ritual (3–4), the Pew Foundation’s “Faith on the Move” report (31), or Wimmer’s attempt to code the relation between industrialism and nationalism (39).

What van der Veer opposes to these unsatisfactory alternatives is not a competing theoretical generalism but rather a masterful empirical demonstration. Indeed, *The value of comparison* embodies its commitment to opposing abstract generalization in the way it is crafted: detailed examples are woven through its entire length, including the initial framing chapters. This makes it difficult to reduce van der Veer’s observations on comparison to a doctrine. Some readers, judging the book by the title, might seek to skim it, discarding the merely empirical “examples” in order to extract or distill from this book the gist of what comparison *in the abstract* ought to look like. Such readers are barking up the wrong tree. There is no blueprint here, no elevator pitch. It is supposed to take time: the examples are the point.

Such a hurried reader, on a hunt for abstract summation, might for instance find that the positive figure of anthropological “holism,” which van der Veer opposes to its evil twin generalism² is something of a moving target. Holism appears in this book in a number of guises: as the drawing of inferences from a study of

2. Which in a previous iteration of this argument he called “wholism” (van der Veer 2014).

fragments (2016: 9); as the interpretation of “another conceptual universe” (27); as an appeal to the broader context or question that is determined for the anthropologist by his choice of a particular fragment to focus on; or indeed the ethnographic question of how people themselves think that parts make up a whole (31). On the face of it these various invocations point to rather different moves within the broad family of holisms (Otto and Bubandt 2010). One could imagine ways of tying these various definitions together into an overarching, and necessarily quite hefty theoretical edifice—one could, as it were, extrapolate a “whole” from these theoretical fragments—but this isn’t really the point. It is sufficient for the purposes of this demonstration, that none of these holisms represents the kind of naïve totalizing generalization that Van der Veer rejects so forcefully: the image of bounded, absolutely homogeneous societies; or the picture of blank universal actors motivated entirely by economic rationality or selfish genes.

Having thus drawn a clear line in the sand, the author can then pragmatically deploy a panoply of holistic strategies to get the job of comparison done. Some of these appeals to holism suggest the kind of radical comparison associated with, for instance, Louis Dumont: they think this *in relation to* us who think that (Dumont 1983: 14). That particular radical holism is a relational engagement in which what is compared are the observer’s own concepts and those of the subjects, whose respective totalities are thus an epistemological effect of the relation. This is a general dynamic that Dumont’s work shares, as André Iteanu and Ismael Moya have noted, with that of Marilyn Strathern or elements of the ontological turn (Iteanu 2013). Van der Veer’s treatment of the notion of civilization (van der Veer 2016: ch. 3) owes something to that radical approach. At other times, the holism deployed in the book challenges “our concepts” in a less acrobatic way, as a merely negative commitment to not taking for granted the existing ways in which anthropologists divide their subject into domains. Thus we find, say, iconoclasm and urban planning are to be read through one another (chapter 4). Different again—and perhaps most common throughout the book—is a third kind of holistic strategy of finding a broader context for a fragmentary observation. This takes the form of what one might call a *caveated* generalization: “this is broadly the case, with important exceptions.”³ The paradigm of this move might be found in the claim that “one continues to have a need to engage with the traditions that are central to societies and the ways they have been interpreted to form the civilizational core of national history, but one needs, at the same time, to acknowledge the contradictory and fragmentary nature of these traditions” (van der Veer 2016: 65–66).

-
3. For instance: “In my view there is no escaping the fact that a continuing hierarchical mentality prevails in India that prevents care arrangements from being extended to the urban poor. We do not thereby return to a holistic view of an Indian caste system, as in Dumont’s *Homo Hierarchicus*, because that would certainly be a wrong perspective on modern India. However, it does imply that turning our back on the significance of hierarchical values in Indian society by focusing on youth culture and media and other manifestations of an Indian cosmopolitanism does not make hierarchy go away” (van der Veer 2016: 139). Other examples might include caveated generalizations about how the application of concepts of civilization create exclusion (79), or the potentially universal nature of human indifference (131).

The statement is illustrative of the book as a whole: it points to ongoing tensions and difficulties of the comparativist's art without presuming to resolve them once and for all through some grand abstraction. How is one to achieve this balance of engaging with, while not quite subscribing to, people's sense of the coherence of their own traditions? How contradictory and fragmentary need a tradition be before it is no longer a tradition but two or three (contradictory and fragmentary) subtraditions? Readers seeking once-and-for-all answers to these questions will not find them in this book. What they will find, however, is a convincing and engaging answer to these questions posed in one set of concrete cases, an answer that to repurpose one of van der Veer's statements on his own method, is "specific without any pretense to general truth, but definitely of broader significance" (van der Veer 2016: 26).

In sum, I am suggesting that the "gist" in the end is precisely the book as a whole: an intricate, multistranded, multiscalar and profoundly erudite historical and sociological comparison of key themes in the study of India, China, Europe, and America. This book certainly "wears the micro-structure of cumulative learning on its face" (Wimsatt 2007: 33). The very possibility of such a book is the argument, an argument for the "comparative advantage" of anthropology, which has the benefit of standing as its own instance and proof. I challenge any reader not to come away from it feeling both wiser and better informed about its empirical subject matter, and invigorated about the pragmatic power of anthropological comparison.

References

- Asad, Talal. 1986. "The concept of cultural translation in British social anthropology." In *Writing culture: The poetics and politics of ethnography*, edited by James Clifford, 141–64. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Candea, Matei. 2016. "De deux modalités de la comparaison en anthropologie sociale." *L'Homme* 218:183–218.
- Chakrabarty, Dipesh. 2007. *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial thought and historical difference*. Princeton Studies in Culture/Power/History. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Dumont, Louis. 1983. *Essais sur l'individualisme: Une perspective anthropologique sur l'idéologie moderne*. Paris: Éditions de Seuil.
- Howe, Cymene, and Dominic Boyer. 2016. "Portable analytics and lateral theory." In *Theory can be more than it used to be*, edited by J. D. Faubion, G. M. Marcus, and D. Boyer. http://www.academia.edu/download/32192328/Portable_Analytics_and_Lateral_Theory.pdf.
- Iteanu, André. 2013. "The two conceptions of value." *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 3 (1): 155–71.
- Otto, Ton, and Nils Bubandt. 2010. *Experiments in holism: Theory and practice in contemporary anthropology*. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell.
- van der Veer, Peter. 2014. "The value of comparison." Lewis Henry Morgan Lecture Initiative, *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory*: 1–14.



- . 2016. *The value of comparison*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. <https://www.dukeupress.edu/the-value-of-comparison>.
- Viveiros de Castro, Eduardo. 2004. "Perspectival anthropology and the method of controlled equivocation." *Tipiti: Journal of the Society for the Anthropology of Lowland South America* 2 (1): 3–22.
- Wimsatt, William C. 2007. *Re-engineering philosophy for limited beings: Piecewise approximations to reality*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Matei Candea
Division of Social Anthropology
University of Cambridge
Free School Lane
Cambridge CB2 3RF
Mc288@cam.ac.uk