

*Foreword: Toward a constructive comparativism:
Between historians and anthropologists*

As Bernardin de Saint-Pierre aptly observed, there is nothing the human mind is more prone to do than draw comparisons. We are always ready to draw comparisons. Comparison is present in the glance of customers and animates the eye of critics. To be discerning is surely to establish analogies, sense reasons, and sketch in a line of argument. Moreover, comparison involves a kind of grammatical capillarity. We move from appreciation to calculation, to a superficial assessment that is rapidly followed by an initial value judgement such as that implied by the common French formula 'One can only compare that which is comparable' (*on ne peut comparer que ce qui est comparable*). When an observer declares that something, some situation or some person that he or she comes across is 'comparable', does this not imply that in his or her mind an initial choice has been made? How can one decide on the spot whether something is comparable unless by making an implicit value judgement that in itself rules out the possibility of constructing something 'comparable'?

When researchers choose to study comparative anatomy, they do not begin by passing a value judgement on the various organs that they plan to consider, taking in the entire range of animal species. A linguist working on comparative grammar, whether with Caucasian languages or Indo-European ones, with a view to establishing their specific characteristics, relies now on morphology, now on phonetics, now on vocabulary. It would be rather ridiculous to say 'one can only compare that which is comparable'. Yet historians have no qualms about doing so. Indeed, ever since the 1920s even the most reputable historians have blithely made such statements, particularly since they rule out making any comparisons outside the limited circle of what seems immediately comparable, which

restricts the horizon to the dominant opinion of one particular society and a mode of knowledge that derives its confidence from its own idea of what is incomparable. No anthropologist would make such a statement. Even on the lips of the fiercest defender of one's own 'terrain' or concession, that would seem incongruous.

Common sense varies from one intellectual discipline to another. I have, without hesitation, taken as my starting point what has been going on in France for more than a century. I believe that I could pick no better example. It was in Paris, in the Quartier latin, that in the sixties and seventies I began 'doing comparativism'. Comparative work is part and parcel of anthropological scholarship, whereas in 'the science of history', it is always unexpected and soon comes to be viewed with distrust, especially when its aim is not only to be constructive and experimental but also to involve historians and anthropologists working together. In the nineteenth century, as early as the first forays of what Tylor was calling a 'science of civilizations', anthropologists drew comparisons between not immediate relations but sets of relations that they had first detected and analysed within each of a series of cultures. Meanwhile historians, particularly French ones, proudly indifferent to all that ethnology represented—cultivated, as it was, in distant parts such as England and America—were passionately applying themselves to the study of what seemed to them to be marked by the seal of Incommensurability: namely, the Nation, their own nation. The virtually limitless domain of human societies belongs by right to both anthropology and history, or did until the latter turned itself into not merely a 'science' but moreover a 'nationalist' one. Militant historians, who had been signing up ever since 1870, were now setting up a stronghold of Incomparability. On both banks of the Rhine, in a Europe that was at that time richer and more powerful than all the rest of the globe, Nationalists were inventing a 'historical science' designed to forge the identity of a race, along with the forces that lay in its earth and its blood. Societies that lacked civilization and writing were brushed aside. If comparison was to be done, it would be of the 'we have . . . /they have' variety, provided that the 'they' designated some opposing nation, and it was understood that 'we' had received the lion's share. Any passing comparativists were shot on sight, without warning. Their number could in any case be counted on the fingers of one hand,

as could ethnographers, administrators, and travellers: poor puny beings with no right to professorial chairs or even to fold-away seats in the university.

I considered it urgent to warn anthropologists, newcomers to the Isle de France, exactly who were the historians whom they confronted, and why even the best of these were continuing, as ever, to repeat, 'You can only compare what is comparable'. Devoid of illusions, I furthermore believe that it is time to put in a plea or write a manifesto to show, in concrete fashion, that in a comparativist endeavour it is essential to work together, and that such an endeavour invites one to coin new categories of common sense and comparabilities that are never immediate 'givens' and are certainly not designed to establish typologies or to set up morphologies. Without a doubt, it is perfectly possible for a medieval historian, a sinologist, and an indianist to engage in constructive comparativism within a group composed of both historians and anthropologists. But why include a 'Hellenist' when, as is well known, noble Hellenism prefers to allow a free hand to value judgements and the exaltation of the Incommensurable? Well, we should remember that it was not always thus. As soon as the major features of the civilization of ancient Greece were perceived, it was drawn into the field of open comparison. Greece and America have been engaged in dialogue ever since the sixteenth century, for they have fables and customs that are very similar. The discovery of the one laid the beginnings of the other open to question. The first anthropologists, a new breed that appeared in the second half of the nineteenth century, always wished to create an anthropology in which the Greeks and ancient societies in general would have a place alongside other civilizations. If Greece was declared to be 'incomparable', that was only under pressure from Nationalists eager to ensure that it was they who took over the legacy of Plato and Homer, in fact of the West as a whole.

Under the influence of social anthropology, introduced into France by Claude Lévi-Strauss, in the 1970s historians of the Middle Ages and ancient societies advertised programmes of anthropology, gladly declaring them to be 'historical' studies of this or that culture or this or that subject, without, however, bothering very much about being 'comparative'. I observed Hellenists such as Moses I. Finley and Jean-Pierre Vernant step-

ping out bravely with the aim of setting in perspective societies separated by both time and space, and then, a few years later, retreating home, no doubt the better to compare Greeks with other Greeks. Had they been caught in the trap of cultural specificities, a trap that closed on them like an oyster shell? And did these early comparativists then succumb to the temptation of establishing themselves in positions where advantages and honours could one day be acquired? We are no doubt beholden to them for the blooming here and there of local 'anthropologies', anthropologies of the symposium in Greece or kinship in Rome, in which they were delighted to discover now new aspects, now new subjects to study. But more often than not, behind these loom anthropologies of Greece in which we may be certain of never setting foot outside Greek territory or even beyond the immediate neighbourhood of the Acropolis of Athens, swarming with its tourists. More than seventy years ago, Marc Bloch suggested comparing contemporary border areas within the framework of medieval Europe, and still today, he is seen as an innovator in the tepid waters of those anthropologies for historians uninterested in any kind of heuristic comparativism.

A few years ago, in order to get around the consensual plan for an overall, long-sighted interpretation of the Greek world, studied from the point of view of its major institutions and its historical subconscious, I ventured to write a paper entitled 'Doing anthropology *with* the Greeks'. For the Greeks are excellent operators, are they not?—Just so long as they are used in an experimental way, whatever the subject under consideration: whether it be a matter of comparing writing and its intellectual effects in Egypt, China, Africa, and Greece; or of thinking about places for politics by comparing politico-religious, theologico-political, and politico-ritual configurations in a wide range of ancient, archaic, or preindustrial societies. In 1992, when Yves Bonnefoy presented this plan to the Collège de France in the prudent form of a proposal for a chair of the comparative anthropology of ancient Greece—a motion that was passed with a majority of only two votes—academic Hellenists immediately expressed their disapproval of any unacceptable collusion between Greece and comparativism of any shade. Their refrain, as usual, was 'The Greeks are not like others'. Comparing Greeks with other Greeks not only does not bother anyone but even suits historians who are innately

besotted with the Nation and cling prudently to all divisions that keep different disciplines apart. For this makes for greater honour for official institutions, greater respect for customs officers and carefully regulated passports . . . and all the rest then follows naturally: recognition within one's own profession, decorations, academies, and ennoblement. All of which, at the cost of a hardly noticed dereliction of duty, is of course intoxicating.

Possible fields for constructive comparativism abounded. Let me mention three or four among those that have been opened up in the past fifteen years. They are, of course, all still ongoing projects. The first, which might particularly attract the attention of philosophers and historians, focuses on the questions 'What is a place?' 'What is a site?' 'How is a territory created?' Once five or six societies were lined up, it was possible to discover disparities between one culture and another and for historians and anthropologists to begin to ask themselves what it meant to found something, to trace a path forward, to have roots, or turn a place into a nonplace. This first comparativist venture pointed toward a study of 'the Earth and the Dead', a configuration ripe for experimentation focused, at one end of the temporal spectrum, on the years between Barèrès and Vichy and the brand-new 'pedigree Frenchman', and at the other end, on the pure autochthonous Athenian shuddering at the approach of Amerindians who wiped out all traces of their presence in whatever might have seemed to be a territory.

The second enquiry, also destined for a fine future, focused on historicity and its different regimes, which turned out to be extremely varied once one was bold enough to launch out and see the shoreline of western historicity recede. What did the past mean to Japan, the Vedic world, Israel, and the pontiffs of Rome? What did change mean? How did anyone come to be convinced that there was such a thing as an 'in-built knowledge of the past in itself'? The historicity of a culture dominated by divinatory knowledge was not necessarily composed of the same elements as a society that set a high value on radical breaks and changes.

A third subject of investigation was assembly practices, the kind that created places for politics in a variety of societies. Here, it was a matter of getting away from the State and its power and observing new ways of deliberating together about a group's common affairs, in the context

of cultures both elsewhere and in the past: in southern Ethiopia in the present day, in the foundations of the Cossacks of the fifteenth century, and in the astonishing laboratory constituted by the communes of Italy between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries. Of one thing there was no doubt: beginnings took multiple forms. They involved concrete practices that were decisive in shaping a public space and politics as yet unsure of autonomy. The fact that a form of democracy had been invented in the mountains of Ethiopia made it possible to envisage 'Politics' evolving far away from the high road that linked Pericles' Athens with the 1789 French Revolution and with other, less radical ones too. At every turn, the domain of comparativism that assumes the freedom to be constructive opens up on to extremely interesting societies, each of which has tried out something new and reveals certain variables, the number of which can easily be reduced or among which one can focus on those that are of a similar nature.

Finally, there is the study of polytheisms and their groupings of gods, closely knit collections of connected powers, with constitutive practices that affect social activities as a whole and underpin the society's mythological stories. In India, Japan, and Africa, and also in ancient cultures such as those of Egypt, Mesopotamia, and the Greek and Aztec worlds, there are polytheistic systems awaiting comparativist analysts who are prepared to note all the positions that a deity, a genie, or a power may occupy and, above all, who are ready to throw themselves into experimentation. Comparables cannot be constructed without experimentation. Polytheistic sets invite many forms of manipulation. When an analyst is convinced that powers should be defined by the various positions that they fill, it is not hard to set aside the individual characteristics of those genies and deities. There will be plenty of time to return to them later. The first thing to do is to focus on objects, gestures, and situations that can be used as so many litmus papers to apply to the various powers, which in some cases form established couples or groups, in others simply combine when they happen to be manipulated together. What is essential is to get a power, on its own or in combination with others, to react to a series of concrete objects, significant gestures, or situations selected within the cultural space of a polytheistic society. It is simply a matter of seeing what happens, obtaining a reaction that reveals some unnoticed

aspect, some unexpected angle or concealed property. One must not be afraid of upsetting history or scorning chronology. The game is certainly worth the candle, for in this way an experimental comparativist acquires the freedom and pleasure of unravelling and reassembling the constituent elements of intellectual operations. This is bound to be advantageous for anthropologists and their historian colleagues.

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