



BOOK SYMPOSIUM

Comparison as critique

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“In *The Value of comparison* Peter van der Veer makes a compelling case for using comparative approaches in the study of society and for the need to resist the simplified civilization narrative popular in public discourse and some social theory. He takes the quantitative social sciences and the broad social theories they rely on to task for their inability to question Western cultural presuppositions, demonstrating that anthropology’s comparative approach provides a better means to understand societies.”

These first sentences of the blurb are well suited to raise potential readers’ interest and curiosity. Certainly mine, as I am quite worried about the predominance of quantitative social science at the expense of the humanities and the frequent recurrence to outdated models for thinking about and acting in our increasingly interconnected, highly divergent world in public debate. Current academia may well be described in terms of the scheme of “three cultures” for knowledge production famously proposed by Wolf Lepennies (1985), in which the social sciences are situated in between the natural sciences and letters (or more broadly, the humanities), oscillating into one or the other direction. In the mainstream social sciences, such as sociology and psychology, there is a marked trend to adopt (what is held to be) natural science approaches and to represent research results accordingly. Current concerns expressed in public debate about the specter of “the postfactual” appear to trigger affirmations of positivist epistemology even more, thereby effecting a further highly problematic embrace of positivism in the social sciences. A major problem with these approaches to the social is that they are strongly rooted in Western assumptions and a sense of universality that is predicated on Eurocentric ideas and a reductive understanding of humanity. Paradoxically, as van der



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Veer notes, “in spite of the increasing economic integration of the world, there is a continuing Western ethnocentrism in research” (2016: 46).

What about anthropology in this configuration? As a discipline devoted to a critical, self-reflexive engagement with difference and diversity, anthropology certainly is predisposed to offer a vision for alternative modes of knowledge production and to introduce postcolonial viewpoints into public debate. But in order to achieve this, still a lot of work has to be done. The critique of the broader social sciences from an anthropological perspective is voiced over and over again. It is easy to join this chorus. Van der Veer’s book, however, is not limited to this critique, even though the blurb stresses this aspect (which is also affirmed by Michael Herzfeld and Kenneth Dean in their endorsements). The real merit of the book for me is that it puts anthropology itself “to task.” Van der Veer is as critical of anthropologists venturing into the cognitive sciences as of those retreating into descriptions of the particularistic, “writing culture” in a literary mode, or insisting on the ultimate incommensurability across deep ontological differences. While the former engage in a mode of comparison geared to generalization that echoes older nineteenth-century stances, the latter have strong reservations with regard to comparison altogether. In the aftermath of trenchant critiques of the comparative method in the 1970s, many anthropologists have turned away from comparison, letting go universalizing aspirations and foregrounding cultural diversity and the particularity of the phenomena and sites of their research.

So “anthropology’s comparative approach” is not simply “there” and ready to be implemented, even though the blurb may suggest this, but is yet to be revived and developed in terms of epistemology, theory, and method. Exactly this is what van der Veer does in this fresh and lucid text. Insisting on “the value of comparison,” he makes an urgent plea addressed to anthropologists to reinvent comparison. Pointing out how to do it on the basis of his own work on various topics studied with regard to India and China, he highlights what kind of insights a comparative approach can generate. I am very sympathetic to this approach and found much recognition and inspiration in reading his book. Like van der Veer, whom I have known since the early beginnings of my scholarly work,¹ I am also situated in the interface of anthropology and the study of religion, and have long been engaged in larger collaborative research projects. More and more anthropologists in the European research landscape, which is geared to funding larger (interdisciplinary) programs, experience being plunged into new set-ups that require sustained conversation and agreement about a shared vocabulary and framework. Questions about the value and use of comparison are in the air. Against this background, putting comparison back on the agenda is timely and necessary not only for organizing our research projects but also for finding a way out of the partly imposed and

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1. In fact, I got my first job in the Research Centre Religion and Society (University of Amsterdam) directed by him between 1992 and 2004. Having moved into different institutions, we recently started to collaborate in organizing workshops that bring together interdisciplinary groups of scholars from Utrecht University, where I took up a professorship in Religious Studies in 2011, and the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity, where he directs the department of religious diversity.



partly self-chosen relative isolation in which anthropologists often find themselves in academia and public debate.

Since the 1970s, the comparative method has been subject to heavy critique in anthropology for its focus on facts and its aim to identify general laws and universally valid statements. Arguing that facts do not exist per se but depend on frames of reference that are at the core of a culture's own terms and need to be described from within, critics proposed ("thick") description as alternative, with great success. In the meantime, there have been several powerful attempts to put comparison back on the agenda of anthropology, including *Comparative Anthropology* edited by Ladislav Holy (1987), and *Anthropology, By Comparison* by Richard Fox and André Gingrich (2002). Both volumes seek to save comparison. The thrust of the argument is that it is mistaken to reduce comparison to one modality (and thus as being in the service of generalizing and essentializing theory by definition); different epistemic regimes come with different "styles of comparison" (Holy 1987). Comparison as such is impossible to be avoided. As Holy, much inspired by J. Y. D. Peel, who consistently advocated comparison along Weberian lines throughout his career (see Peel 2016: 17–37), puts it this way: "There is no field of empirical inquiry which does not use comparative analysis. . . . The problem of comparison turns on the problem of translation . . . and all our analysis is ultimately comparative in that we have to translate to be able to describe" (1987: 15). Building on this argument, Fox and Gingrich distinguish between "weak comparison" as a largely implicit method to produce knowledge and explicit, reflective, and thus "strong" comparison. Echoing Holy's point they state that "humans always compare; comparison is an essential element of human life and cognition. . . . The question is what kind of recognition scholars give to this basic human activity" (Fox and Gingrich 2002: 20). This is also the starting point for van der Veer: "In fact, the point I want to make is that social and cultural analysis always takes place within a comparative frame. Some of us are actually aware of this; others less so" (2016: 32). Comparison being unavoidably intrinsic to our research practice, we better deal with comparison reflexively. This is a crucial basic insight, and I very much wish that this longstanding awareness-raising campaign by protagonists of comparison—at long last—be taken seriously in anthropology. So the question is not whether at all to engage in comparison but how to deploy it as a critical project. This involves both a critique of comparison as conducted in various arenas, and an attempt to compare otherwise. Questions to be addressed include the following: Which styles of comparison are privileged and why, and what outcomes do they (aim to) produce? Which epistemological regimes underpin various modes of comparison? And most important: How to make critical use of comparison so as to enhance insight and understanding in our current, highly diverse world?

What is the specific contribution of van der Veer to these periodic attempts to revive comparison in anthropology? He argues that anthropologists should employ comparison to critique other, Eurocentric styles of comparison and the problematic epistemic regimes on which they rest:

Comparison is, in my view, in the first place a question not of the right research design, the correct choice of cases to be compared (the “what” and “how” to compare), although this is obviously important, but of an awareness of the conceptual difficulties in entering “other” lifeworlds. That “otherness” should not be exaggerated, since everyone is in some way interacting and communicating with everyone else. Moreover, anthropology is highly equipped to engage problems of translation and of bridging different semantic universes. Its contribution is therefore not to utter always the qualifier *but* when social scientists are generalizing, but rather to contribute to radically new and open ways of understanding reality. This is an uphill struggle and against the spirit of the time (Zeitgeist), which is deeply convinced of the universality and generalizability and the ultimate genetic basis of everything. Nevertheless, it is a struggle worth pursuing. (van der Veer 2016: 11)

Van der Veer’s take on comparison as a critical intellectual project that engages otherness and is able “to contribute to radically new and open ways of understanding reality” is well taken. Pondering path-dependent practices of knowledge production across the social sciences and humanities, it is clear that there is a need to reframe research agendas beyond divides between research on specific areas (as Asia, Africa, or Latin America), on the one hand, and generalizing disciplines that by and large do not engage with academic knowledge with regard to these areas and yet are grounded in Eurocentric frames without being aware of it, on the other. These divides are still mapped on the distinction between “the West” and “the rest” that has been deconstructed and discarded by postcolonial critique (notably also by van der Veer’s earlier work, 2001) and become practically obsolete with the increasing plurality of European metropolises, but still resides in the minds. Moving out of this deadlock requires alternative, transregional modes of knowledge production and exchange that do justice to difference and diversity, and yet imagine a shared world.²

Decentering the comparative project established by Max Weber, which was geared to grasp the distinctiveness of Western modernity, van der Veer employs comparison to study the circulation of Western categories (such as religion, nation, civilization) across the globe. Rather than situate comparison in an evolutionist frame, as was still the case with Weber, according to which differences between societies across the globe are temporalized and spatialized (Fabian 1983) and the West is regarded as pinnacle of development, van der Veer takes the coexistence of particularities in time and space as his point of departure. He offers a rich set of exemplary studies that show the “comparative advantage of anthropology” (2016: 25), construing comparison as triangular (China, India, and Europe), focusing on specific fragments (in the Maussian sense of “total social facts”) as entry points to the

2. In Germany I take part (as chair of the advisory board) in a large initiative by the *Forum Transregional Studies*, together with the Max Weber Foundation, to involve scholars from so-called systematic, generalizing disciplines and area studies in a joint project of transregional knowledge production. This kind of collaboration is of utmost importance in order to rethink Eurocentric research agendas and develop new departures for knowledge production and exchange. See <http://www.forum-transregionale-studien.de/nc/en/forum/homepage.html>.



“larger whole” in which they are situated, and staying grounded in social life via a concern with the concrete—bodies, food (tea, coffee), and substances as opium. Of special importance for my own scholarly interest is the way he demonstrates the value of comparison in relation to religion. Far removed from comparative religion as a study of world religions (long dominant but now under much critique in religious studies), van der Veer traces the global spread of the modern category of religion with colonization and evangelization, without taking the category to fully contain actual religious practices in the context of India and China. Particularly illuminating is his comparative analysis of the role attributed to images of the sacred in China and India (for Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists, Confucians). It shows that in both settings, images feature as “representations of a virtual reality” that are able to invoke in their beholders a sense of presence and as figures that are “up to something.” Based on this premise, he calls attention to acts of iconoclasm in both settings, showing that the destruction of images—for different reasons and by different aggressors, from people with another religion to the secular state—does not involve the end of belief, on the contrary. Today there is a strong interest in the study of images and iconoclasm, but so far this is often limited to clashes (e.g., about the Muhammad cartoons, “Charlie Hebdo,” etc.) in religiously diverse settings in Western societies. Iconoclasm, too, is still approached against the backdrop of tensions and clashes about the pictorial representation of the divine in the Christian tradition. Van der Veer situates inquiry into the politics and aesthetics of representation in a broader, global frame that, intriguingly, also includes the role of the state with regard to the protection and destruction of images.

Pondering his approach and relating it to my own concerns—the study of religiously plural configurations in Europe and Africa from a material angle³—I would like to raise four issues that deserve some further elaboration and discussion.

One, I understand that van der Veer seeks to “stay clear of both universality and endless particularity” (2016: 148) and that he is not interested in generalization (26). And yet he states that the aim of comparison is to find “new and open ways of understanding reality” (see the above quote). I wonder what he means by “reality”—in the singular—and how it is situated between the universal and the particular. How does van der Veer understand this in between space? He uses notions as sacred-profane, religion-secular, image-icon, to just mention some key concepts from the toolkit of the study of religion, with remarkable ease. Without the use of these and similar concepts he could not write comparatively; these concepts function as a *tertium comparationes* through which similarities and differences can be assessed. As comparison requires a language for description and analysis that cuts across different settings, the use of concepts is the sine qua non of comparison. What are his criteria for choosing certain concepts, not others, for comparative work? Are the concepts he uses not still grounded in Eurocentric thinking and

3. I just started a new long-term collaborative research program titled *Religious Matters in an Entangled World* that takes material religious forms—including buildings, images, food—as entry points to the study of religion in plural settings in Europe and Africa. Comparison will be an important dimension of our work.

classification, as is being pointed out over and over again in critical research on religion? The big question is how to combine critical deconstruction of concepts with doing comparison. How to avoid being either stuck in untranslatable specificity or a hegemonic writing about difference through a Western vocabulary? Moreover, could a comparative project that is deliberately intended to move beyond Eurocentric universalism also open up possibilities for new generalizations—or even a new universality—that make it possible to think about reality and the world as shared (rather than merely pluralized) on the basis of a critical (still to be articulated) vocabulary (Mbembe 2016)?

Two, van der Veer concentrates on comparison as a scholarly activity. However, as comparison is basic to the articulation of similarity and difference, it is important to take into account that our interlocutors, too, engage in comparison. I think that a scholarly appraisal of comparison also should include taking into account the comparative practices of our interlocutors, through which they establish similarities and differences, identities and alterities, as was suggested by Brian Larkin and myself with regard to the comparative study of Muslim and Christian reform movements in Africa (see 2006; see also Peel's critique in his recent book [2016: 192–214]). Especially in diverse settings in which people coexist across various kinds of differences (between established and newcomers, between religion and atheism, as well as within the religious spectrum—e.g., Muslim, Christian, Jewish, Buddhist, etc.), mutual comparison is part and parcel of dynamics of in- and exclusion (see also Kresse 2017). How to flesh out the link between how people compare and construe similarity and difference, and scholarly comparison as envisioned by van der Veer?

Three, van der Veer has the exceptional (linguistic) expertise to do research in India and China, and thus to conduct transregional comparison all by himself. Most anthropologists have deep knowledge of one or more settings in one particular area. I think that the ambitious comparative project proposed by van der Veer invites us to rethink our mode of working and to consider more explicitly collaborative endeavors (in some way in line with the current tendency of funding large-scale multidisciplinary projects). Could the reappraisal of comparison in the new style proposed by van der Veer make us think seriously about new forms of collaboration in anthropological knowledge production that involves scholars from Western and other societies at eye level?

Finally, what are the limits of comparison? Toward the very end of the book, van der Veer states that he compared India and China “on the assumption that they are comparable.” Somewhat to my surprise, he writes that his focus on the comparable does not imply that there are not also “examples of radical otherness” that are “incomparable (2016: 150). If the value of comparison lies in finding a language for translating difference, I do not understand how and why a phenomenon may qualify as incomparable to anything else. The problem is to find a critical language for translation. Therefore I am inclined to think that the claim of sheer incomparability does not match with the critical comparative project launched by van der Veer in this thought-provoking opus.



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