

Anthropology as a comparative project: Some recent challenges

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INTRODUCTION

When thinking about comparison, one is faced with a puzzling contradiction.

It's viewed with skepticism, as new relativist and reflexive preferences seems to favor a science of the particular exclusively. But simultaneously, comparative analysis are at work in the numerous anthologies presented on such a diversity of issues as gender, ethnicity, migration, sub-cultures, youth culture, nationalism and tourism, and so on. But there's a lot more to comparison than what is seen as the traditional, positivist "hard-core"-scientific analytical stance. Ladislav Holy, in his 1987 anthology "Comparative anthropology", remarked on the paradigmatic shift from a singular, positivistic paradigm to what he saw as varying **styles** of comparison. Holy's most important contribution in our particular context is the insistence on comparison as a *tool*, and not a goal in itself. I quote:

"It is questionable that a functional link exists between comparison and generalization. Whether comparison is functionally linked to generalization or to description depends rather on how the relationship between generalization and description is conceptualized." - unquote -

Holy specifically identifies the problem of comparison as an **epistemological** problem. It depends on **HOW** we compare – if one compares at all, and in extension; **WHAT** we compare. And he followed this up by questioning the necessity for generalizations for the purpose of comparison. And his call for a more clever conceptualization of the link between generalization and description has, as we will see later, been met by new advances in theory, on how to understand the modern condition.

I will thus attend to the need for better theory for comparison later in this talk, here I simply want to emphasize that our aim should be to compare *if it teaches us something*, or if it helps others understand something. It should not be a goal in itself.

Sometimes, attending to the simplest of questions is the best way to approach the most complicated of matters. So too in this case, and I believe the text for this lecture opens for reflections on some basic questions about comparison as such that needs to be addressed, if we are to understand anything about what sort of challenges that may lie in the comparative project within anthropology. I therefore think it will be fruitful to keep the following questions in mind during this lecture:

What is comparison?

Why comparison?

How do we compare?

Who compares?

What do we compare?

In the search for some answers to these questions we may grasp both the development of the comparative project – which is one of the **master narratives** of anthropology - and the challenges that this discipline has recently encountered, as well as some possible creative and constructive outcome of the debates on comparison. I will not seek to answer the questions in succession, but refer to them as we go along.

PART 1: FROM GRAND THEORIES TO PARTICULARISM

In Fredrik Barth's "Cosmologies in the Making" from 1987, one can read that - and I quote –

“It is a striking fact that, great as the emphasis has always been in anthropology on presenting our discipline as comparative, there is no established procedure which could be named ‘the comparative method’” – unquote –

- and this from a man whose previous publications include titles like “The lives of others, and our own”, “Synchronic comparison”, “Process and form in social life”, “Models of social organization” – titles which explicitly or implicitly rests on some sort of comparative approach aimed at an understanding of social life. I’m not saying it’s contradictory, but rather wish to focus on the paradox which Barth himself refers to in the same chapter in “Cosmologies...” : that – quote –

“our comparative analysis will only succeed by moving away from the complexity and reality of people’s lives and thoughts..” - unquote –

I believe that whilst the first statement – on the lack of a described method for the comparative project – still rings true, the second one is a more complicated matter, as it seems like Barth here refers to *one particular form of comparison*, - that of comparing ‘cultures’ or ‘societies’ as enclosed entities, as *pieces* of manhood which can be isolated and tested according to objectifiable similarities and differences, and where variables are manageable and similar everywhere. In other words, he questions not only HOW to compare – that is, in his call for better methodology - but also WHAT anthropology wants us to compare. In this sense, he seems to be in tune with Holy’s argument, of a necessity to rescue comparison from its links with generalization. More on this later, for now, I will claim that these statements may be regarded as a response both to internal and external theoretical developments which all challenged the comparativist approach in anthropology.

The most important ones, I believe, are these:

i) Theories of a westernized modernity

ii) Post-colonialism and orientalism

iii) The “crisis” in anthropology

Firstly, theories of westernization demanded a comparative response from anthropologists where one were able to show that there was an endless variety of local

responses and resistance, and that cultures did not ‘die out’ as many would have it, but rather that they **evolved, changed**, but also that local life had an impact on globalization itself. Thus, anthropology, by thorough ethnography of particularities, could refute the idea of a clear-cut westernization, and identify other influences on globalisation.

Secondly, works on post-colonialism, like Edward Said’s ‘Orientalism’, besides being an important prologue to the ‘representational crisis of anthropology’, also spurred responses of a comparative nature, Gingrich and Fox says, as - quote –

“...anthropologists insisted that orientalism and colonialism had quite distinctive outcomes as they were put in place around the world” – unquote

I will return to Gingrich and Fox later.

There are, in other words, two obvious WHY’S here, which serves, in a sense, to rescue cultural variety and complexity from oversimplification. Even though post-colonialism developed as a counter-movement to the hegemony of the western explanatory mode, it rapidly became one of the analytically strongest and politically potent models of explanation for the global condition itself, and “Orientalism” - a book first and foremost written on the relationship between the former colonial powers and the new nations of the Middle East - soon became an iconic point of reference for many other former colonies as well. Still, the focus on WHO,s comparing WHAT, gained new strength with the debates on post-colonialism, and these were further discussed in the representational debate in the 1980’s.

And finally, it questioned the WHY, as Said and others would claim that the process of ‘othering’, which meant to exoticize the orient for the sake of constructing a common occident – that is, the west - was its main goal. - I quote –

“Orientalism is a style of thought based upon a distinction between the orient and the occident. Thus a very large mass of writers has accepted the basic distinction between east and west as the starting point for elaborate theories, epics, novels. Social descriptions and political accounts concerning the orient, its people,

customs, ‘mind’ and so on. This book also tries to show that European culture gained in strength and identity by setting itself off against the orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self.” – unquote -

The criticism of the positivist comparative approach is obvious, and the WHY that Said identifies is surely one which negates any claims for objective scientific knowledge production.

Thirdly, as anthropology engaged in a debate on representations and reflexivity - often referred to as it’s moment of crisis – the possibility of comparing what was seen as distinctly separate cultures seemed to wither. In the introduction to the 1999-edition of the 1986 classic “Anthropology as Cultural Critique”, Marcus and Fisher states that cultures are open rather than closed systems, best described in terms of flows, diasporas, and hybrids. In anthropology today, clear-cut cultural borders are replaced by multicultural zones, where revival, renewal, transformation and reconstitution of cultural difference is produced. This does not mean, however, that they believed this crisis to be the end of anthropology, an argument they have been ascribed to by others. Rather, they wanted to encourage a transformation of the ideals of anthropology, lets call it a change from a process of ‘othering’ towards producing explicit knowledge on experienced realities. The blurring of borders makes comparison more difficult, but still imperative, if anthropology is to remain an important discipline for understanding the complexities of modern life everywhere. A key task, according to the 1999-edition of Marcus and Fisher, is to figure out WHAT to compare in the first place.

Now, It’s important to emphasize that neither Barth nor the others here mentioned ever rejected the comparative project all together, but rather pointed to the fact that more often than not, comparing was seen as something done more or less *ad hoc*, with only *implicit* connections to developments in anthropological theory.

The above-mentioned challenges for the comparative project spurred not only new arguments and chrushed old ones, it also opened up for what Gingrich and Fox have called *a plurality of comparative approaches*, which is paralleled in Marit Melhuus’ description of – quote – “the why of comparison (which) is grounded in an assumption

that there exists *different* ontologies, epistemologies and cosmologies with **little or no reference to western traditions**, and it is the task of anthropologists to attempt to describe these worlds, as well as our own” – unquote.

If this statement is to be taken seriously, different approaches for different settings are required.

PART 2: CHALLENGES FOR THE COMPARATIVE PROJECT

So far, I have referred to debates which have discussed the comparative project in the past, and which have dismissed – once and for all – the possibility to engage in positivist, hard-core scientific empiricism. One cannot use the methodology of a science lab on human kind, or to put it differently: The cultural laboratory does not exist. Still, comparison is a part of the modern project of scientific knowledge production. Thus, Vassos Argyrou argues - following Said and others - the need for transference of any non-modern (traditional) culture through meta-narratives of modernity is essential – a concept to be presented below – for them to be comparable with notions of ‘otherness’ and thus manageable. I quote -

“The West would not know itself for what it claims to be – rational, reflexive, free” - end quote –

if it couldn’t identify something non-modern, irrational (magical and superstitious), ignorant and trapped in the bondage of nature. This, Argyrou claims, modernity found in its own past - its pre-modernity - but also in the imagined others of the present. Modernity’s need for otherness, in which it could identify itself, coupled with the empiricism of the enlightenment are the foundations for the ideal of comparison as method for production of knowledge.

So then, if there's an inherent potential for ethnocentrism in the modern project of comparison – as Argyou argues – then we are faced with the task of asking those simple questions again - who, why, what and how - (VIS TIL TAVLA) but this time with a more reflexive and relativist approach. André Gingrich and Richard Fox, in their anthology called “Anthropology, by comparison” from 2002, isolate three dimensions of comparison:

i) the basic cognitive dimension –

humans always compare, and thus the question is to what an extent anthropology recognizes this human activity.

ii) the implicit, or methodological dimension,

as we in our ethnography address others who are, to a certain extent, from other contexts than ours. This is the dimension where reflexivity, translation and representation are pursued, a theme which I will return to later in this talk, and

iii) the explicit or epistemological dimension of comparison,

which used to be the domain of objectivist and universalist preconceptions about the human condition, but which now have been replaced by a new - quote – “pluralism of qualitative methods is emerging” – unquote.))

While the two first forms of comparison are present in every fieldwork situation, the third, the epistemological dimension, refer to those works that seek to utilize pluralistic comparison in order to pursue additional and different results than that gained by analysis of specific contexts alone. Thus, Gingrich and Fox argues, explicit comparison relies on the two first dimensions, and are thus in a processual relation to them.

In the following, I will seek to identify the processes which has opened up for this variety of comparative methods, before turning to the challenges that lies in combining relativist and particularist approaches with comparative analysis. Finally, I wish to focus on some new (or renewed) comparative analytical tools, as possible ways out of these discussions, and I will seek to connect them to Gingrich and Fox's three dimension.

I feel a need to recapitulate by listing some of the challenges these new approaches must take into account:

i) We need to repute gross over-simplifications of cultural difference (which were served us for instance in the theories of westernization and orientalism, but also in the ‘grand theories’ of structuralism and functionalism)

ii) To keep on developing knowledge about the human condition which may help understand both localities and global structures

iii) To develop texts and films on cross-cultural or multicultural diversity and complexity which makes decision-makers aware of the need for thorough, long-term research on complicated and small-scale “places”. It is, I believe, an important challenge for anthropology *writ large* and particularly as a comparative project, to be able to develop knowledge which contribute to a greater understanding of how complex and diverse the world actually is.

iv) And finally, to develop new comparative models (in plural) which are open-ended and process-oriented, and which opens for a more flexible orientation towards entities like ‘place’, ‘culture’, ‘society’, ‘identity’, and so on.

From here on then, I will focus on this last point, on the development of comparative models which takes into account the WHAT and the HOW-question which we started out with, and which I believe to be the core questions in identifying the new challenges to the comparative project within anthropology.

In other words, we will go from identifying what has caused these challenges to seeking out possible ***solutions*** to them, which I then wish to discuss by way of exemplification, via my own fieldwork experience, and the products – a film and a thesis – with the aim of making it clear just how complex and full of contradiction a comparative approach may be. This will serve as an illustration of the challenges, and will thus not be a defense of my own work in Tobago. Still, I hope to be able to show how the three dimensions of comparison mentioned earlier are present in my work. I will also refer to a recent debate on modernity’s *meta-narratives* and ethnography, presented

by Harri Englund and James Leach in an article in “Current anthropology” in 2000, which will guide us through the exemplifications from my fieldwork.

PART 3: CONSTRUCTIVE OUTCOME / NEW POSSIBILITIES

We’ll now return then, - to the reflections on dimensions of comparison mentioned earlier.

i) the basic cognitive dimension.

ii) the implicit, or methodological dimension

iii) the explicit or epistemological dimension of comparison)))

In my thesis I describe how my protagonists seek to construct their identity based on reflections (or comparison, if you will) on “this place” and what they call “*foreign*”, which first and foremost refers to the UK, USA or Western Europe. I will for the purpose of illustrating **the first dimension mentioned**, refer to two separate settings where Cane and Jackson respectively tell their stories about their experiences *in foreign*.

Jackson had moved to Switzerland after having romanced a Swiss girl who lived in Tobago for a while. On his return trips to the village, much time was spent on street corners and in rum shops, telling stories about *foreign*, and reflecting on his life there. This public reflection, which started with telling a story as an example of what his life was like, was in effect a way of comparing ‘us’ with ‘them’. For instance, Jackson would reflect upon his meeting with a gang of what he called ‘nazi’s’, and show how he managed to keep his cool whilst simultaneously claiming his right to be there without being hassled. “There are good people and there are bad people everywhere”, he said, and showed how his typically Tobagonian way of responding to a challenge had its intended effect also in Switzerland. By verbally and physically confronting the gang who had offended him and by standing his ground - in other words, he didn’t show any fear, he stood up to them – he utilized his repertoir for resistance towards bullying which he had developed ‘back home’, and therefore reflected – both verbally, cognitively and bodily – on the differences **and** similarities of ‘here-and-there’.

The way our minds works, how we make order out of disorder, is based on categorizations, and thus comparison. In this sense, it is a part of social life, which we are supposed to describe. According to Gingrich and Fox, it should therefore be a task for ethnography to make this sort of implicit comparison *explicit*, at least because it is one of the ways we, as humans *and* ethnographers, make order out of things. Here, the importance of ethnography as a means of making **similarities** more apparent is also imminent, and I wish in this respect to take the opportunity to argue - with the aid of David MacDougall's arguments in his article "Transcultural Cinema" - that the usage of film as medium may aid us in opposing the - quote -

"prevailing conceptions in anthropology of culture and cultural difference." - unquote -.

It is in the immediately recognizable, in the representation of everyday trivialities *and* grand happenings, in the totality of sensory detail which film and pictures refers to, that the visual media has its greatest strength - besides being a wonderful medium for storytelling. The point is, MacDougall claims, that *translation* of culture channels data through what he calls the keyhole of language, which leaves the bulk of the data behind. Film and photography, on the other hand, produces meaning on the other side of the keyhole, and in many respects renders the *translation skills of the anthropologist* unnecessary. It opens up for comparison freed from the explanatory modes inherent in the anthropological skill of translation.

It must be added, however, that there is a translation performed in the act of recording and editing filmed material, and I have in my thesis written on how there's a need for a more thorough theoretical link between visual anthropology and anthropology *writ large* - here I wish only to emphasize it's potential as a tool for the production of a different kind of ethnographic material - which is potently comparative in it's nature.

With this remark, we pass onto the second dimension, **the reflexive (or methodological) dimension of comparison.**

From an understanding of comparison as being implicit in human learning and understanding, we move to the usage of comparison for the search for ethnographic

material. A crucial point here, is the distinction between an *explicit reflexivity*, and more unconnected comparison between ‘me’ (i.e. the anthropologist) and ‘them’. In a sense, this touches upon WHAT to compare as well. In my view, there is an important task in making the reflexive approach explicit, so as to put focus on the social setting being a result of the meeting between protagonists and the ethnographer. In this sense, the entity to compare with other entities is **not** some cultural scene, social happening or likewise, perceived to have been objectively described, nor is it the personalized experiences of the ethnographer of his/her home place.

Rather, it’s the unique situation where the ethnographer is perceived and described as part of the scene, and where the production of knowledge is openly described and analyzed which should be compared to other similar situations. Leach’s and Englund’s argument, in their article on the meta-narratives of ethnography, rests upon a desire to do away with ethnography being simply – quote – “empirical contributions to the scientific debate on modernity”, - unquote - which only serves as an argument for the idea of multiple modernities. It is as if modernity’s many versions **require** comparison, as a means of defining what all these many modernities are a version of. Here the obvious danger of under-communicating the importance of those impacts others than ‘the west’ have on globalization is imminent, but it also undermines – quote – “the uniqueness of the ethnographic method – its reflexivity, which gives subjects authority in determining the contexts of their beliefs and practices” – unquote.

There’s a need for a quick description of what Englund and Leach means when they talk of the meta-narratives of modernity. In a sense, what they ask is if they are the only tools available for comparison. I quote:

“Every act of ethnographic writing is, explicitly or implicitly, an act of comparison, because the ethnographer has no choice but to write (or edit film – I might add) in relation to what his or her readers can be assumed to know already. The fundamental difficulty of the meta-narratives of modernity lies in their inability to make the ethnographer’s predicament explicit. Instead, they eclipse the lived experience of fieldwork and make “modernity” and the abstractions associated with it natural foundations for comparison.” – end quote

Some would say that what they mean is simply ‘theory’, and that the whole project of scientific knowledge production is in itself an important master narrative for the modern project. However, Englund and Leach does **not** reject the ideal of “thinking big”, but claim that the way ethnography today is used as examples of modernity makes individual perceptions, actions and reflections less important than the ‘pattern’ in which they more or less fit, or exercise a variation of. I quote:

“Fieldwork as lived experience is indispensable for the production of knowledge. One hallmark of that tradition is that ethnographers **allow themselves to be transformed in the process of inquiry**...it challenges the perceptual faculties the ethnographer is accustomed to trust. **(And here’s the point)** It is the necessity to translate this experience from one domain of “representations” into another which carries the potential for new knowledge about **both** domains” – end quote

In other words, here’s the potential for new theory, based on lived experience, which needs to be translated so that it takes into account the changes in cognitive understanding of the ethnographer – the challenges this experience has brought upon the meta-narratives of modernity. Theory based on lives lived, not on ideas of how life is.

In Tobago, I learned through comparison, that is, I constantly ended up in situations where my preconceptions on both how things were ‘there’ **and** what manhood, marriage, fathering, friendship was – were challenged by lives lived.

Daniel Miller, in his book “Modernity: An ethnographic approach” asks us to rub the theoretical accounts of modernity against the lived experience of ordinary people. So too, with our preconceptions, I believe, as they are an important pre-condition for the reproductions of specific notions of *what modernity is*. In my film, which was screened before this lecture, I tried to do exactly this; to highlight my preconceptions and show how I coped with surroundings so different from what I was used to. I would constantly compare ‘this place’ with ‘home’, but my claim is that it didn’t turn into ethnography until I made those conceptions– **explicitly!** – a part of the repertoire I brought with me into the social situations which I participated in, and then described what happened. Thus,

WHAT to compare is not so much the ‘cultural stuff’ – like religious practice, family structures, indigenous hunting methods – rather it’s the way people manage, adapt, respond,- both to inner and outside influences as well as to the presence of the ethnographer.

It’s about knowledge, how to seek it and represent it to others. And with this in mind, I could follow the advice of Miller – to rub everyday lives in the face of generalized theories about masculinity in the Caribbean, and show how the ideas of clear-cut, institutionalized *and* gendered moral dualism first and foremost serves the purpose of making complicated lives manageable for theory, and not to depict actual lives.

Better theory is required, Englund and Leach says, and argues for the reflexive, thorough fieldwork and ethnography as basis for a renewed comparative project within anthropology. One of the writers who try to meet the demand for better theory, is Robert. J Foster, in his “Bargains with modernity in Papua New Guinea and elsewhere” from 2002. And this presentation of his article takes us to the third dimension of the renewed comparative project, **the explicit, or epistemological dimension.**

But first, I will seek to describe how I ended up using the concept of *in-betweenity* as a means of describing both their lives and mine, as well as the social processes I was engaged in, and which thoroughly changed my perceptions of both ‘their’ reality as well as ‘mine’.

I suggest that the know-how of in-betweenity consists of some maneuvering skills, in those instances where people live in, around – and sometimes of – what I have called the cultural grey-zones ‘between’ cultures, - or, in a sense, where culture erupts, meets, changes. It will, in each particular case, involve a different set of know-how, depending on where one might be – life on a beach in Tobago requires different skills in maneuvering *in-between* than life in an inner-city ghetto, or on a fishing vessel in the North Atlantic. What unites them, I would suggest, is the permanence of a situation of constant maneuvering between different, and sometimes contradictory, moral, economical and social ideals. However – and this is an important point – I have tried to make explicit that what is specific for each case remains to be investigated, and that the main purpose of the usage of the concept is the desire to incorporate processes of change

which people live through, as well as describing the situation of the fieldworker. We all meet in *in-betweenity*, and we all have some skills in adapting to such a state.

In my fieldwork, I found it on the beach – where young men making a living of being available for tourists balanced what was seen as inappropriate behaviour with an ability to make a living and thus lived up to the expectations of providing for ones family. I also found it in the rum shops, where men's struggle to balance their money spending – between obligations to friends and family obligations – spurred a range of adaptations in individual lives. And finally, I found it in **my own** adaptation to my fieldwork experience – in the fact that I soon realized that all I was shown and taught was preconditioned by certain ideas they had of who I was and what I wanted,- ideas that changed as they learn more about me and vice versa.

In-betweenity does not impose any implicit or explicit content, or what it means to live in-between – rather, it tells us where to look, and what to look for, or to paraphrase Robert Foster: It points us towards the processes which takes on local forms, processes which may be compared, as well as their specific outcome. His stance is that an explicit theory on modernity - with which individuals **bargain for space for individuality** – will be able to – I quote –

“connect lived experience in particular localities not only to world-historical shifts, but also to lived experiences in other localities. This is the import and promise of ‘comparative modernities’” - unquote

In this sense he is **not** in agreement with Englund and Leach and their almost categorical dismissal of any theory of modernization – which they see as an endemic westernization – but rather emphasizes what I believe Miller asked us to do, and which I have quoted before: to rub real lives in the face of theory.

CONCLUSION

In summing up, I wish again to pick up one of the factors which blurs the WHAT-question; the problem of ‘place’. Most anthropologists would agree with me in that there is no such thing as a particular field anymore, which may be accurately

separated from other imagined 'fields'. Still, and somewhat paradoxically, people live locally based lives. The point is that in any locality, there's an endless variety of individualized life. Imagine this scenery: In a valley in Northern Norway – or perhaps an island will serve our purpose better - geographically separated, perhaps with their own language, marriage customs and perhaps even their own religious beliefs, cable-TV brings the soapy messages of what a good life is, commercials show kids just what kind of sneakers they should wear to be cool, and the local restaurant owner, from Tobago, has started a course in soca-dancing (winning) and Caribbean drumming, and has helped kids establish chat-rooms on the internet where they spend ours discussing football, clothes, music, falling in love – with kids in a Primary school in Plymouth, Tobago. The complexities of social webs which most people globally are entangled in, makes studies of particularities even more important, and the need for epistemology grounded in experience-based ethnography is imminent, are we to understand the processes of change which are *actually* taking place – in a variety of ways – everywhere, and not only 'there'. Modernity locally, yes, but what is that, exactly?

Englund and Leach, Miller and Foster – all of these theorists which I have been referring to, are at least in agreement on one thing; it's the ethnography based on experience-near fieldwork that matters, and with it the local responses to those abstract systems of modernity, - and which should be the basis for development of what Foster calls – quote - “pluralizable theories of modernity – flexible enough to preserve our freedom to move about the ethnographic cabin and unambiguous enough to specify why we are doing so.” - Unquote -.

It is in the situational contestation of the trust in abstract systems - situations which vary historically and culturally – that we find the basis for endless variations of local lives. Thus balancing between making sense of the 'big abstractions' and the particularities of social life is essential, if the comparative project within anthropology is to revive itself.

If I may be so bold, - I want to end this talk by quoting the last paragraph in my thesis, which I believe sums up my argument, and which also contains a plea for a continuing search for new analytical tools for anthropology:

“The need for widespread ethnography of particular localities, where the fieldworker is present and his/her preconceptions acknowledged *and* tested, unique in space and time but still expressions of the global condition, is important *both* for the understanding of actual lives locally, *and* for the development of an even more precise analytical framework in which to understand 'post-modernity'. There is, however, also a need for comparison, for multisitedness, and an acknowledgement of the fact that few 'places' are as small – or as big – as they appear to be.“

Thank you for listening.