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## To Contrast and Compare

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### *The Necessity of Comparison*

Any social scientist should be aware that he is indulging in comparison all the time. In the case of history, the comparisons are usually in time, in that of other social sciences, predominantly in space. The most familiar method of the historian is to take his own society as the norm and then to see how far the past is similar or different from this. This is also what an anthropologist, sociologist, or economist tends to do, in the dimension of space rather than time. 'Informally, comparison is built into the method of the subject, for even in his first piece of field-work the anthropologist is comparing the categories of his own society with those of the society he studies. . .' (Pocock 1961: 90).

De Tocqueville's work illustrates such a method of comparison, revealed in his memoirs: 'In my work on America... though I seldom mentioned France, I did not write a page without thinking of her, and placing her as it were before me. And what I especially tried to draw out, and to explain in the United States, was not the whole condition of that foreign society, but the point, in which it differs from our own, or resembles us. It is always by noticing likenesses or contrasts that I succeeded in giving an interesting and accurate description. (1861. 1: 359). He did this, ultimately, not to understand but France itself: 'for no one, who has studied and considered France alone, will ever venture to say, understand the French revolution' (1956: 21).

The necessity of comparison was stressed by the anthropologist Evans-Pritchard: 'In the widest sense there is no other method. Comparison is, of course, one of the essential procedures of all sciences and one of the

elementary processes of human thought' (1963: 3). He was here following his master Durkheim, who wrote that it is only possible to explain by making comparisons. Without this, even simple description is scarcely possible; one can scarcely describe a single fact, or one of which there are only rare examples, because one cannot see it well enough' (quoted in Lienhardt 1964: 30).

Hence a number of observers have noted that in order to understand one phenomenon, one must place it in perspective or comparison to others. As Robert Lowie put it, 'At the same time a phenomenon is understood only in relation to others: "He little knows of England who only England knows." Hence it is well to look at Western culture in perspective' (1950: 9).

### *The Purposes of Comparison*

The comparative method is just one of many tools used by social scientists. As with all tools, it is necessary to consider both why one is using them, the purpose, and how best to use them.

### *Asking Questions*

#### *Distancing the over-familiar*

A first use of the comparative method is to act like a reverse telescope, pushing away things which are too close, so that a gap is created and one can see them. This might be termed, 'distancing the (over) familiar', or turning the obvious into the unobvious (or 'nature' into 'culture', in anthropological terms).

One difficulty for all analysts is the strong pressure to leave unquestioned (and hence unexplained) a great deal of behaviour in the past or in other societies because it is similar to our own and hence self-evidently David Hume wrote, 'the views the most familiar to us are apt, for that very reason, to escape us' (quoted in Dumont 1977: 19), or, as Braudel put it, '... surprise and distance-those important aids to comprehension-are both equally necessary for an understanding of that which surrounds you so evidently that you can no longer see it clearly' (quoted in Burke 1972: 24). Likewise, Marx noted, 'Human history is like paleontology. Owing to a certain judicial blindness even the best intelligences absolutely fail to see the things which lie in front of their noses' (1964: 140). Or, as Kluckhohn observed, 'it would scarcely be a fish that discovered the existence of water' (quoted in Bohannan 1969: 14).<sup>(1)</sup> The difficulty was also alluded to by Sir Henry Maine, who wrote that one of the major problems for all of this is 'the difficulty of believing that ideas which form part of our everyday mental stock can really stand in need of analysis and examination' (1890: 171).

The problem is acute for the student of his own culture who needs some 'external fulcrum' in order to be aware of the central features of the society in which he lives. Such a fulcrum is automatically present for an anthropologist who works in an alien culture. Yet, even such an anthropologist may need support; as Homans argued, 'when a man describes a society which is not his own, he often leaves out those features which the society has in common with his own society. He takes them for granted, and so his description is distorted' (1960: 382).

This difficulty of studying 'the obvious', being too close to the subject, was alluded to by Peter Laslett. 'This feeling that it is all obvious is a curious and exasperating feature of the whole issue. . . the force of the contrast between our world and the world which the historian undertakes to describe has hitherto been somewhat indistinct. Without contrast there cannot be full comprehension' (1971: 7).

The benefits of a wider knowledge of alternative social structures through the comparative method acts as a 'distancer' of the familiar. This is probably what Bloch was referring to when he wrote that 'the comparative methods in the hand of ethnographers has restored to us with a kind of mental shock this sense of the difference, the exotic element, which is the indispensable condition for a balanced understanding of the past' (1967: 47). For, as he wrote elsewhere, 'to speak of discovery is also to speak of surprise and dissimilarity' (Bloch 1954: 120). Finally, to quote Dumont, 'To see our culture in its unity and specificity we must set it in perspective by contrasting it with other cultures. Only so can we gain an awareness of what otherwise goes without saying, the familiar and implicit basis of our common discourse' (in Carrithers 1985: 94).

#### *Familiarizing the distant*

Equally problematic is the fact that many of the things we encounter in our work are so unfamiliar and distant that we cannot get inside their logic or 'understand' them. In this difficulty, we need to use the method with the telescope in its normal position; in other words, to bring the phenomena closer. The difficulty was well described by David Hume: 'Let an object be presented to a man of never so strong natural reason and abilities; if that object be entirely new to him, he will not be able, by the most accurate examination of its sensible qualities, to discover any of its causes or effects,' (quoted in Winch 1958: 7). The usual temptation is either to avoid the subject altogether or to dismiss it as irrational nonsense.

How does the comparative approach help? One way is through providing hypotheses concerning how an unfamiliar system can work. This may be

related to one of the two methods which the mathematician G. Polya suggests are used to solve complex problems: 'ransack our memory for any similar problem of which the solution is known' (quoted in Burgess 1982: 217). Now the solution may be 'known' in a sort of way through the studies of others in other societies. Examples would be the insights which anthropological studies of curious phenomena like the blood feud or witchcraft gave to historians studying the same phenomena in the West.

The comparative method provides possible alternative models of how things might be connected and what they might mean, it brings them within our range of comprehension, hence partly overcoming Hume's problem.

#### *Making absences visible*

A third important service the comparative method can provide is by revealing absences. In all societies, many of the most interesting things are the absences, and it is extremely difficult to be aware of these. What I mean is rather well illustrated by Robert Smith, who recounts how a Japanese scholar replied when he was asked why ancestor worship persists in modern Japan: 'That is not an interesting question. The real question is why it died out in the West' (1983: 152). Of course, both are interesting questions-but the absence is certainly just as curious.

To take two examples, many of the most important features in the English past were the absences; the weakness of kinship, the absence of religious intolerance and political absolutism, the lack of group pressure. The same is true in Japanese history. Many of the most significant facts have been things that did not happen; the absence of foreign invasions and the bubonic plague and the virtual absence of malaria and, in the late Tokugawa period, of domesticated animals. These gaps can only be detected if we have a strong positive image of what is 'normal' and then see that in certain cases the predicted did not happen. The failure to use comparative models is one of the reasons why there has been little success in explaining the origins of the various major changes which we collectively term 'modernity' or 'development'. A comparative framework provides a strong 'backcloth', against which the foreground can be seen. Without it much of the foreground is invisible.

There are, however, dangers with this approach, especially if the 'absences' are analysed at the level of whole societies or civilizations, rather than particular features. It is one thing to say that the domestic fly was largely absent in Japan, another to say, as some have, that the Japanese lack a sense of sin, the self, or principles in general. This is one of the reasons why labels

like 'pre- industrial', 'pre-literate', 'pre-capitalist', with their evolutionary and negative connotations, can be both misleading and dangerous.

One strategy which was adopted to deal with the ethnocentric and often racist implications of the discovery of apparent absences was the development of 'functional equivalents'. For example, in the first half of the twentieth century it was shown that many features of Western societies were not 'absent' but 'disguised' and could be located by examining their functional equivalents. The State re-appeared in the form of segmentary lineage structures, the law as kinship reciprocities, Western philosophy and science as witchcraft cosmologies and complex mythical systems. The lessons were learnt but since then, as Peter Burke comments, there has been an inevitable reaction against too much relativism and an over-emphasis on deep similarities which ironed out differences. The problem now is to recognize both similarities and differences without returning to those arrogant assumptions whereby one's own solutions are seen as intrinsically 'natural' and 'better' than all others. I shall return to this problem.

#### *Testing Answers*

Another use for the comparative method is the possibility it gives us to test hypotheses. Let us look at this in relation to history. Although historians are aware that they are not trying to establish laws, their 'descriptions' always contain elements of causal connections of the form 'If this, then that'. They are constantly on the lookout for both necessary and sufficient causes, links of a specific and general kind. Starting with a problem such as 'What caused the English Civil War?', 'What were the effects of printing?', 'What caused the industrial revolution?', 'How did attitudes to childhood change in early modern France?', the search is for causal connections and covariations. Having formulated a hypothesis, it is necessary to move outside the particular instance to see if the connection holds more widely. For instance, if Calvinism is held to be a necessary precondition for 'capitalism', are there 'capitalist' societies that are not Calvinist?

Thus, as Nadel wrote, 'Even if we are initially concerned only with a single society and the appearance in it of a particular social fact (which we wish to 'explain'), our search for co-variations capable of illuminating our problem will often lead us beyond that society to others, similar or diverse, since the given society may not offer an adequate range of variations' (1951: 227).

It may be that social scientists will claim that they are not trying to make generalizations, but a brief glance at their work shows that they usually are; and any general statement has to be tested cross-comparatively. Evans-Pritchard rightly argued that 'It is also evident that if any general

statements are to be made about social institutions they can only be made by comparison between the same type of institutions in a wide range of societies' (1963: 3).

The necessity for broad comparison has been recognized by most who have thought deeply about the origins of modern society and its likely future development. In discussing the 'European Miracle' and its causes, E.L. Jones wrote that 'Comparisons, or contrasts, with other civilizations are essential for an assessment of Europe's progress. Otherwise conjectures based on a winnowing of the European historical literature are uncontrolled' (1981: 153). In his equally ambitious 'The Unbound Prometheus', Landes declared that 'The method of inquiry is to seek out these factors of European development that seem to be both significant and different, that set Europe apart, in other words, from the rest of the world. By holding Europe up against the mirror of the most advanced non-European societies, we should be able to discern some . . . of the critical elements in her economic and technological precedence' (1972:14-15).

The general point is that one needs constantly to move back and forth between the minute examination of a single system and the comparison of whole systems. This was the method also advocated by the anthropologist Radcliffe-Brown. He pointed out that while 'the study of a single society may... afford occasion for hypotheses' these 'then need to be tested by reference to other societies', for the single case 'cannot give demonstrated results'. Nadel added that it is only 'if we include time perspective and cultural change in our enquiry' that 'the necessary co-variations will be available' (quoted in Nadel 1951: 240).

### *Methods of Comparison*

Comparison can be undertaken in numerous ways, each appropriate to its task, and one cannot lay down in advance which will be the best. All one can do is to raise some of the alternatives. We may start by noting the three types of approach distinguished by Durkheim.

- (1) We could consider a single society at a given time and analyse the broad variations in particular modes of action or relationships occurring in that society.
- (2) We could consider several societies of generally similar nature which differ in certain modes of action or relationships; more precisely, we could here compare either different and perhaps contemporaneous societies, or the same society at different periods, if these exhibit some limited cultural change.
- (3) We could compare several, perhaps numerous, societies of widely different nature yet sharing some identical feature; or different periods, showing radical change, in the life of the same society (quoted in *ibid.*: 226).

### *The Units of Comparison*

The success of the comparative method will, of course, depend on the comparison of things that can be compared. This consists of several features. One is that the units compared are roughly of the same order of magnitude; for instance, it would not be particularly fruitful to compare the handshake in England with the family system in China.

Second, in order for comparison to be effective things must be of the same class or order in some way. Thus to compare, say, marriage in America with tea drinking in China would probably be fruitless. The selection of the comparisons is all-important. Yet even by choosing something that looks similar, one can be deceived. Words like 'city', 'marriage', 'family', 'law' are notoriously loaded with ethnocentric assumptions. Even such apparently obvious terms as 'house', 'meal', 'body' carry complex sets of assumptions within each culture. As Evans-Pritchard puts it, 'it was obvious that the method depended entirely on the units of comparison being of equivalent value. Are, for example, "monogamy" among the Veddahs of Ceylon and "monogamy" in Western Europe units of the same kind?' (1963: 9).

This is one of the reasons why anthropologists have tended to shy away from comparing 'things' in themselves, and stress the need to compare the relations of things. Pocock (1961: 114) argued that 'comparison can only be conducted in terms of relations, and not of items or isolated institutions; and this relational comparison begins from the moment that the research worker approaches his material'; or as Evans-Pritchard (1951: 57) wrote, 'what the modern anthropologist compares are not customs, but systems of relations'. Anthropologists have also reacted against what they take to be the Frazerian tendency to wrench bits of culture out of their context. They stress the need to compare a whole culture or social system; 'a solid and thorough comparison of values is possible only between two systems taken as wholes' (Dumont 1986: 243). This may be the reason why, as Peter Burke points out, the most famous, and successful examples of comparison are 'usually comparisons between examples of systems of social relations (feudalism, capitalism, mercantilism, absolutism, colonialism, etc.)'.

Some of the necessary precautions are summarized by Baechler (1988: 40): 'we must compare what is comparable... for example, it would be fruitless to compare the Europe of today with Africa South of the Sahara...Points of comparison of the same order of size must be selected-not pre-modern Europe on the one side and the rest of the world on the other, but Europe and a particular historical episode that occurred in a spatial and temporal framework of the same dimensions.'



### *Controlled and General Comparison*

One might note two major forms of comparison-general comparison between, say, civilizations, and more limited comparisons, where the range of difference is limited. The latter method of controlled comparison is described by Loure: 'It is the method of intensively comparing groups of common derivation, or with a basically identical culture, yet differing in some specific factor, the point being to ascertain what other elements likewise differ' (1950: 47).

### *Contrast and Compare*

There are two separate operations which need to take place in comparative work, the establishing of similarities and the establishing of differences. Rousseau recognized that different methods were required to establish each of these, and that one could not be done without the other. 'One needs to look near at hand if one wants to study men; but to study man one must learn to look from afar: one must first observe differences in order to discover attributes.'<sup>(2)</sup> Rousseau implies that the final aim is to reach the deeper similarities, the attributes, the 'psychic unity of man' as it was later to be called.

More recently, some anthropologists suggested the reverse, namely, that we are more concerned with differences than similarities. Evans-Pritchard wrote that 'I would like to place emphasis on the importance for social anthropology, as a comparative discipline, of differences, because it could be held that in the past the tendency has often been to place the stress on similarities. . . whereas it is the differences which would seem to invite sociological explanation. This is an involved question, for institutions have to be similar in some respects before they can be different in others. . .' (1963: 17). Pocock (1961: 90-91) echoed his views. 'More formal comparison is both possible and desirable, but here again the concern will be not with similarities only, for the sake of some pseudo-biological classification, but with differences also, for the sake of heightened understanding.' He put this even more strongly when he wrote that 'Comparison in this sense is concerned with similarities only to penetrate more profoundly into the differences' (ibid.: 114).

Of course it is possible to stress just the differences, to take cases which hardly overlap at all. This is the method of contrast. It can be fruitful in generating questions. This was recognized, for instance, by the sociologist Wright Mills, who advocated the study of extremes and opposites. 'Often you get the best insights by considering extremes-by thinking of the opposite of that with which you are directly concerned. If you think about

despair, then also think about elation; if you study the miser, then also the spendthrift.' Or again, he writes that in order to stimulate mental activity, what you can do is to give the range and the major types of some phenomenon, and for that it is more economical to begin by constructing "polar types", opposites along various dimensions' (1970: 235). If the cases are not merely imaginary thought experiments, but real instances, the stimulus is even greater.

Yet, while the method of contrast is stimulating, in the long run it is probably not as fruitful as that of comparison; it only helps with posing questions. If we take seventeenth-century England as an example, the method of contrast might lead us to ask why cities did not have defended walls, unlike those in almost all other parts of the world, or why there were no 'castes' as De Tocqueville noted, or why there was hardly any concept of pollution or *mana*, or why the rate of interest was so low, or why there were no proper 'bandits', or why the English were so obsessed with pets, or why there was such a late age at first marriage for women, and so on. But while suggesting questions, the method of contrast gives little help in testing answers. Hence contrasts are only a start. Only through proper comparison can one begin to connect the threads and move towards some tentative explanations.

True comparison is based on the fact that there is simultaneously a good deal of overlap or similarity, but also considerable differences. This was recognized by Bloch, who wrote that 'there is no true understanding without a certain range of comparison; provided, of course, that comparison is based upon differing and, at the same time, related realities' (1954: 42). Nadel has explained the basis of the method of comparison. 'The study of co-variations is bound up, more specifically, with judgments on similarity and partial identity, the very concept of variations implying a sameness of facts which yet permits of some measure of difference' (Nadel 1951: 224-25). For him, the comparative approach 'means, in essence, the analysis of social situations which are at first sight already comparable, that is, which appear to share certain features (modes of action, relationships) while differing in others, or to share their common features with some degree of difference' (ibid.: 222).

Thus for true comparison we need cases where we can hold certain things constant, certain underlying similarities, and watch other factors vary. As we shall see, it is not easy to find such cases, at least at the global level.

#### *How Many Poles of Comparison?*

The degree of success of comparative work seem to lie to a large degree in

the number and nature of the comparisons. The method of contrast involves a pair, a dyad-for example, the West and the rest, England and India, the present and the past. It is an example of binary thinking. This can be valuable, but almost inevitably, in practice, whatever the good intentions of the author, it leads to one of the pair being privileged as the 'normal', 'natural', the standard against which the 'other' is seen as a deviation or somehow inferior.

This is a danger noted by Peter Burke in his comments. He points out that, for example, in the famous case of 'feudalism' as an ideal type, there is a tendency to see French feudalism as the 'proper' form and all other forms of 'feudalism' as deviations. In fact, as he points out, there is no need to take the French form as the ideal type. Yet this tends to happen frequently because many of the central concepts in comparative sociology 'were invented by westerners who were thinking in the first place of their own societies'. How are we to escape from this danger?

The general nature and advantages of an approach which avoids binary thinking is outlined by Dipankar Gupta. As he puts it, the issue is 'whether we employ a dyadic or triadic mode of analysis'. In a triadic framework one can see peculiarities at both ends of the dyad and not just at one. To a great extent the triadic method takes care of both relativism and essentialism, for the comparative eye can be turned inwards'. Gupta continues his important analysis as follows:

The triadic mode is the common ground in so much as it manifests itself in different ways in the dyads. No matter how many units we are comparing, at each point of comparison there are two digits which are constrained by the triadic analytical common ground. The empirical similarities which allowed the units of comparison to be summoned up dissolves the moment a triadic comparative analysis is completed. This is because the analytical common ground, i.e., that which has to be explained, ceases to be relevant any longer, for in the process of comparison newer and fresh analytical problems emerge which require a new common ground, analytically and empirically....As the common ground is pressured to dissolve, the initial dyadic distinctions cannot live on indefinitely either... In this sense one can say that a triadic method of comparative analysis studies humankind and not social species (pace Durkheim), for ideal types and dyads keep getting out of date.

This seems to be an excellent account of what the answer to Burke's problem should be, and what we are aiming for. But how do we attain it? The answer was, in essence, given by Max Weber in his discussion of how one constructs ideal types, particularly in his essay "'Objectivity" in Social Science'. His account is so famous that all I need to do here is jog our memories by quoting one or two of his central passages.

An ideal type is formed by the one-sided accentuation of one or more points of view and by the synthesis of a great many diffuse, discrete, more or less present and occasionally absent concrete individual phenomena, which are arranged according to those one-sidedly emphasized viewpoints into a unified analytical construct (Gedankenbild). In its conceptual purity this mental construct (Gedankenbild) cannot be found empirically anywhere in reality. It is a utopia. Historical research faces the task of determining in each individual case, the extent to which this ideal-construct approximates to or diverges from reality, what extent for example, the economic structure of a certain city is to be classified as a 'city-economy' (Weber, 1949: 90).

Weber constantly stresses the fact that this is not a normative ideal. This is not a model of what 'ought' to exist, but only a logical construct. The construction of an abstract, ideal type 'recommends itself not as an end but as a means' (ibid.: 92). It does not exist in reality. 'It has the significance of a purely ideal limiting concept with which the real situation or action is compared and surveyed for the explication of certain of its significant components.' Thus it is 'an attempt to analyse historically unique configurations or their individual components by means of genetic concepts' (ibid.: 93). An ideal type has 'no connection at all with value-judgments, and it has nothing to do with any type of perfection other than a purely logical one' (ibid.: 98-99). The aim is not to classify but to emphasize uniqueness. 'The goal of ideal-typical concept-construction is always to make clearly explicit not the class or average character but rather the unique individual character of cultural phenomena' (ibid.: 101). The ideal-type is a construct which is to be sharply distinguished from actual historical facts. Furthermore, as stipulated by Gupta, this is a dynamic process. Ideal types are constantly changing. Any set of ideas will fall to meet changing circumstances and the desire for new knowledge. 'The progress of cultural science occurs through this conflict. Its result is the perpetual reconstruction of those concepts through which we seek to comprehend reality' (ibid.: 105).

Weber and Gupta outline what we are striving for. The difficulty is in the practice. Max Weber himself was able to generate numerous highly suggestive and useful ideal types. Lesser mortals constantly find that their ideal types become too contaminated with the particular cases with which they are familiar. What is the way out of this?

Beyond stressing the need for some kind of triadic analysis which 'problematizes' particular cases and, as Weber says, makes each case unique, I can only offer one other practical suggestion here. This is a little different from Weber's and Gupta's third case lying in a 'common ground' or constructed ideal type. It is the suggestion that it is often extremely productive to study three, rather than two, cases.

Usually, when just two instances are considered, for instance 'holism' and 'individualism' or 'hot' and 'cold' or 'pre-industrial' and 'Industrial', or 'India' and 'Europe' or 'The West' and 'The rest', then one is dealing with contrasts. More fruitful, because it gives the chance of deeper insights, is a three-way comparison, for instance, as De Tocqueville made of France, England and America, Norman Jacobs, of China, Japan. and Europe, or Baechler, of India, Europe, and Japan. It appears that the effect of choosing three rather than two poles of comparison is to increase the power of analysis by a very large factor.<sup>(3)</sup>

The method runs alongside that described above. There is a triangulation which makes each case equally unusual. It is no longer possible to 'side' with one against the others. In fact, this method is probably best combined with the Weberian one. In other word, one has an explicit three-way comparison of actual, concrete, historical cases, but they are set against a backcloth of the Weberian ideal types, which alone make the comparisons possible. In a way, this is a four-way comparison, with one part as common ground, as in the background of a painting. Each case comes into view because of that background and its peculiar and special features become more accentuated by a double process-both because a particular comparison is being 'constrained by the triadic analytical common ground' of the ideal type, but also by the tensions of the implied contrast to the third real case. By extending the triadic method of two cases and an ideal type to the more complex one of at least three cases and an ideal type, we move a long way away from those problems of relativism and essentialism which have plagued much social science for more than one hundred and fifty years. We can move towards a position where we simultaneously stress the similarities of peoples and rejoice in their uniqueness and differences. I will describe the start of an attempt to put this latter method into action in the final part of this paper.

The combination of these approaches also throws light on two other problems. The first concerns the question of universals. As the Rapporteurs commented, 'the comparative method tries, however imperfectly, to deal with universals: Prof. Kolff suggested that "gender", "time", "death", "order", "chaos", "individuality", "sociality" were certain universals present in all societies and the object of comparison is to isolate something which can be compared across boundaries of those units'. The problem is that one of the findings of anthropology is that these supposed 'universals' often dissolve when examined in detail. For example the meaning of time or death is notoriously so varied in different societies that it is often better to consider them not as universals. Perhaps the best

solution was summarized by Willem van Schendel (building on the remarks of Gupta), when asking me to comment on this. He noted that 'they are of course dealt with differently in different cultures. When we compare such categories, we may treat them as universals if we want to bring out the similarities, but we may just as legitimately focus on the differences, thereby deconstructing them as universals'. Just so. Behind any particular cultural treatment of 'death' or 'time' there are probably some universals but we do not need the progress of biology or physics to remind us that what these universals are is much contested.

The second problem is concerned with how comparative studies can deal with processes, with historical time. This was a point specifically noted by Majid Siddiqi in his discussant's paper, particularly in relation to the questions of colonialism and the difficulties of a practising historian. In theory, there should be no difficulty in applying the triadic method as much to variations over time, that is, process, as to variations over space. Weber himself clearly thought that this was possible. 'Developmental sequences too can be constructed into ideal types and these construct can have quite considerable heuristic value' (1949: 101). In fact, there is surprisingly little discussion of this and it might be worth very briefly considering what one or two ideal-typical developmental sequences might look like.

Let me give a few famous examples from the literature, confining myself merely to the period from the middle of the eighteenth century in the West. Adam Smith set up a model of the natural tendency towards wealth. Malthus set up an ideal type model of the tendency towards 'misery'. De Tocqueville saw a powerful tendency towards equality and individualism. Maine suggested the natural movement of 'progressive' societies from status to contract. Marx saw the natural tendency towards increasing class conflict and the final victory of communism. Tonnies saw an inevitable tendency from community towards association, Durkheim towards organic rather than mechanical solidarity. Weber himself saw the inevitable movements towards that simultaneous increase in rationality and irrationality. More recently, Wittfogel and Anderson have seen the natural tendency towards absolutism, and Fukuyama, towards democracy (1957, 1974, 1992).

The point about all these is that they are attempts to create dynamic models which apply over long periods of time, explaining both what normally happens and pointing to the deviations from the norm. They are, when treated with suitable caution, a valuable set of backdrops for a working historian, throwing up questions, exceptions, and some common, unifying, frameworks. Just to take one example, the Malthusian 'natural' tendencies towards increasing misery through the positive checks of war,

famine, and disease as population builds up provides the backdrop against which the unlikely 'escape' of parts of the world into a new demographic regime in the eighteenth century can be appreciated more clearly.

### *A Short History of the Methods of Contrast and Comparison*

The method of comparison has a very long history, as Peter Burke points out in his comments on my paper. He mentions Herodotus, Aristotle, Polybius, Plutarch, and Tacitus among the ancients and Bodin and Machiavelli from the Renaissance. It would not be difficult to add to the list, for instance, it would be a pity to miss out Montaigne, in many ways the founder of the comparative method at wider than Europe.

Yet in order to focus the discussion let us look at a number of these methods in action, when applied to perhaps the largest of all questions, namely the reasons for the emergence of that set of inter-linked phenomena which we call 'modernity', and in particular that aspect of it concerned with production and distribution, which we shall call industrial capitalism. In approaching such a problem, it would, of course, be possible to look at only one case, for instance, modern Europe. If one did this, there would be an implicit comparison between 'pre-industrial, pre-capitalist/pre-modern' and its opposite 'industrial/capitalist/modern'. Many people have approached the problem in this way and though some discussions are illuminating, in the end one goes away dissatisfied. There is a sort of inevitability about the account; we know it happened, therefore, it is difficult not to believe that it had to happen. It is impossible to test causal hypotheses. Factors which are stressed as necessary and sufficient causes seem to be so, but we cannot carry out a counter-factual thought experiment and wish them away. Are they really significant, or just coincidental?

Furthermore, we are left wondering whether there are other even more important and deeper pressures which are necessary, a sort of lowest common denominator, which can only be exposed by looking at other examples. Given this desirability for some explicit comparisons, what shall we compare, and how shall we compare them?

If we start with the assumption that the first case of the emergence of industrial capitalism is England, one strategy would be to compare it systematically with other parts of Europe. There is something to be gained by choosing areas where many of the factors could be held constant; within Europe we can assume an Indo-European language, a Graeco-Roman past, Christianity, a temperate climate, and so on. With such a strategy, we could compare England with almost anywhere in Europe-Ireland, Portugal, France, Italy. This procedure was the major one adopted by comparative

thinkers until the middle of the nineteenth century, of whom Adam Smith, Millar, Kames, Voltaire, Montesquieu, and others are notable examples. Most of them also used a method of contrast, contrasting the 'West' with the 'rest'. For instance, Montesquieu's or Malthus' famous comparisons of Western Europe with China. The method was one of comparison within Europe, and contrast outside. We may roughly term this the Enlightenment approach. It was in many ways very fruitful and laid the grounds for the emergence of the social sciences as we know them.

It was modified and broadened in scope in the second half of the nineteenth century as the evidence available for the method of contrast became suddenly much richer. The work of the great classical parents of modern social science stretched the contrasts much further, contrasting 'Europe' with whole civilizations which had not 'escaped' into modernity. Sir Henry Maine contrasted India and Europe. Marx compared modern capitalist societies with the Asiatic and ancient modes of production. Later, the greatest of the comparative thinkers, Max Weber, compared parts of Europe (Protestant and Catholic) and contrasted 'Europe' with Islam, China, and India. With the developments of the hundred years which separate the Enlightenment from the later nineteenth century, the gap between the 'West' and the 'rest' in terms of technology, political power, social system, and so on had grown enormously. What struck the great founders were the contrasts, between status and contract, capitalism and pre-capitalism, between rational and traditional authority, and so on.

This seam of grand comparative work, later mined to good effect in the works of Perry Anderson, Fernand Braudel, Louis Dumont, Ernest Gellner, Jack Goody, E.L. Jones, David Landes, William McNeill, and others, continues to provide enriching insights. Yet it needs supplementing. Perhaps part of the problem is that the later nineteenth-century heritage and the huge gap that developed between the 'West' and the 'rest' tended to make the method too much one of 'contrast' rather than 'comparison'. One tends to be faced with those vast binary oppositions which are ultimately only of limited value. A sense of this difficulty was well described some time ago by Goody, when he criticized binary oppositions of all kinds (1977). Often the contrasts are so great, that there seems to be little overlap. Since there are so many and such great differences, one is left confused as to which are important and which subsidiary factors. For instance, is it the absence of caste and pollution, is it the absence of magical religion, is it the absence of corporate kin groups, is it the legacy of Greek science, is it the good water communications, or is it other factors, which explain the rapid economic development of certain parts of Europe? Furthermore, such a



dichotomizing approach has the dangers inherent in 'Orientalism', that is, of creating mirror images, where everything is reversed.

In order to escape some of these difficulties, we need examples of countries which have some deep similarities with western Europe, but also very deep differences. In Weber's time, no such examples could be found. No country appeared to have achieved the kind of rapid economic growth which was then occurring in Europe. It was not at all clear that there was anywhere outside Europe with deep similarities to Europe.

One of the first to hint at a possible candidate for a true comparison was Marc Bloch. He noted that Europe and Japan shared one great blessing; they were each at the remote end of a continent, and hence shared protection from destructive invasion. 'It is surely not unreasonable to think that this extraordinary immunity, of which we have shared the privilege with scarcely any people but the Japanese, was one of the fundamental factors of European civilization, in the deepest sense, in the exact sense of the word' (Bloch 1962, i: 56). He does not explicitly make the connection, but he does notice that there is another deep structural similarity in the political foundations of Europe and Japan. He noted that despite differences, there was in Japan 'a regime which was nevertheless in many respects closely akin to the feudalism of the West' (1962, ii: 452). He argued that 'Feudalism was not "an event which happened once in the world". Like Europe-though with inevitable and deep-seated differences-Japan went through this phase' (ibid.: 447). Thus a deep political similarity seemed to exist. Later others were to notice other similarities. For instance, Robert Bellah noted the similarity between certain Buddhist sects in Japan and that ethic which Weber had distinguished as having an 'elective affinity' to capitalism (1957).

All this is made much more interesting as the pattern of economic development in Japan began to become obvious. If we concentrate on England and Japan, we find that they were the first to achieve sustained economic growth in their respective hemispheres, outdistancing their competitors by at least two generations in each case (Rostow 1962: 1). All of this only became obvious after Weber and Bloch could make use of the fact. Therefore, we are led to wonder whether there might be something in common in the two cases, assuming that there are some sets of structurally interlinked causes in each case. Thus a comparison of Europe with Japan, using the backdrop of the 'normal' situation where societies reach a 'high-level equilibrium trap', has considerable potential. On the other hand, the fact that Japan is in many respects so utterly different from England and Europe, means that we can conduct a kind of counter-intuitive experiment.

We can look at factors which seem to be necessary and those which seem to be sufficient.

Recognition of the value of Japan in this respect, and of the difference between the method of contrast and comparison, is provided by E.L. Jones when he wrote, 'Japan provides, intriguingly enough, a comparison rather than a contrast with Europe... remarkable for its outline similarity with late preindustrial Britain. Yet there was only the slenderest connection with Europe. . .' (1981: 157).

A comparison of Europe and Japan also forces one to rethink the nature of capitalist development, which the methods of contrast tended to leave as unproblematic. Japan has capitalism, but capitalism with a difference, and hence shows up the peculiarity of western capitalism itself, not only in comparison to preceding or non-capitalist societies, but also in relation to a very different form of equally successful industrial society.<sup>(4)</sup>

The approach depends on one major assumption. It assumes that while Japan is different from England, it is not totally different. We need a comparative case that has elements of both difference and overlap. Thus while recognizing, as Ravindra Jain in a written comment on this paper reminded me, that there are enormous cultural differences between England and Japan, in language, religion, history, philosophy, popular culture, and soon, there are some striking geographical, political, and demographic similarities. We also need to establish that there is not too much mutual contamination. The problems are well discussed by Jacobs (1958: 12-13) in relation to the problem of comparing England and Japan.

If every similarity was due to borrowing, sociological analysis would be limited to social history. The independent origins standpoint, on the other hand, prevents generalized analysis, limiting the validity of social analysis to one specific reference; the development of capitalism in both Japan and Western Europe would be attributed to coincidence. Following the principle of convergence, we see that the structures of Japan and western Europe show important underlying principles in common, despite variants in traits....

There is not space here to develop this line of argument. The similarities and differences between England and Japan will be the subject of other work. All that I wish to illustrate are some of the dimensions involved in combining the study of similarity and difference. It is this combination which lies behind the comparative method. It is a method which will take on added importance as we witness the unprecedented economic growth of China, India, and parts of South East Asia, and wonder about the similarities and differences between what is happening there and what happened in the European, American, and Japanese cases in the past.

### *Notes*

1. An old Chinese text, cited in Koestler (1960: 269) states that 'As the fish swims in the water but is unmindful of the water, the bird flies in the wind but knows not of the wind'.
2. I have been unable to locate the origin of this famous quotation and would be glad to hear from any reader who can point me to its origin. [Ed. Rousseau?]
3. Further discussion of the disadvantage of a binary approach (Dumont) and advantages of a triadic approach (Jacobs) is given in Macfarlane 1992/3 and Macfarlane 1994. For Baechler, see Baechler 1988.
4. For a similar kind of approach, but primarily comparing German-Swiss capitalism with Anglo-American capitalism, see Albert (1993).