



TRANSCRIPT

The value of comparison

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It is an honor and a privilege to be invited to the University of Rochester to give the Morgan Lecture, a veritable anthropological institution. I want to salute Lewis Henry Morgan and a previous Morgan Lecturer, Ward Goodenough, who both contributed substantially to the study of kinship. Morgan is still a household name among Chinese anthropologists due to the influence he has had on Marx and Engels. It is an irony of history that the ghost of this brilliant capitalist still haunts the academic institutions of Communist China. Ward Goodenough who recently passed away and was my (very senior) colleague at the University of Pennsylvania in the late eighties delivered the Lewis Henry Morgan Lectures in 1968 titled “Description and comparison in cultural anthropology.” Goodenough argued that the description of the basic emic categories, primarily those of kinship that one’s informants used could be used to reconstruct their culture, as if it was a language. In my talk today I am revisiting the topic of comparison, but not from the angle of kinship. I will focus instead on the study of cultural fragments using a holistic conceptualization that problematizes the “view from the West.”

Despite general agreement that there is a variety of materials (film, video, audio-tapes, music, sermons, documents) that anthropologists are working on and a variety of methods applied to these materials, the empirical part of anthropology continues to be primarily based on the ethnographic method which consists of a long stay in the field, a familiarization with the “way of life” of the people one studies, and thus in many cases a long linguistic preparation to acquaint oneself with the local language. The rather vague term “way of life” suggests a holistic approach in which a society is examined in its entirety. As one knows it is practically not possible to have such a total vision, unless one fantasizes societies as outside of history and outside of a larger world of interaction. What ethnographers claim, however, is that their study of everyday life in a small setting allows them to interpret a larger entity (local, regional, national, or even global) and that that knowledge cannot be gained through the deployment of surveys. The claim here is that through close study of a fragment one is able to comment on the larger whole and an understanding of the larger whole allows one to interpret the fragment (whatever that particular whole or fragment may be). It is the choice of a particular fragment of social life that determines what its relevant context is or what the larger question is that one wants to address. While this resembles the hermeneutic circle of textual interpretation one needs to recognize that social life is not a *social text* and certainly not a closed text and that the openness of social change is multi-directional. Similarly, one needs to steer clear from a universalizing approach that first defines some kind of essence, like “ritual” or “prayer” and then studies it comparatively across cultures.

At this point it is important to emphasize that what I am suggesting is not to be misunderstood as a process of generalization from the particular. The purpose is not to come to some general truth, but to highlight something that is not general, something specific without any pretense to general truth, but definitely of broader significance. What is general is often banal and while anthropologists deal with ordinary life they strive to say something about it that is not banal. This is also the reason why anthropologists, however much they are prepared when going on fieldwork, generally have to change the questions they ask and the general direction of their fieldwork while confronted with the real-life situations in the field. Moreover, these situations are in fact processes and can only be grasped in dynamic terms. They change during and after the fieldwork, which also implies that the findings are often difficult to replicate in later fieldwork by other fieldworkers. On the other hand, it is also not to be taken as a far-going empiricism, in which the minutiae of social life are recorded in exasperating detail. As Marilyn Strathern (1998: 1) wrote: “If at the end of the twentieth century one were inventing a method of enquiry by which to grasp the complexity of social life, one might wish to invent something like the social anthropologist’s ethnographic practice.” Such a purpose cannot be sustained by precision of observation and description (extended case study or situational analysis) alone or by claims to producing a representative sample. The perspective I offer is obviously close to that of Clifford Geertz (1973) in his famous essay on “thick description,” but there is a significant difference. What has to be curbed is the quite understandable desire to say something general about, say, religion as a universal entity (as a “cultural system”) or

about a particular society's religion in general (as in "The religion of Java") or about the general and thus comparable features of a world religion's manifestations in different societies ("Islam observed"). The move from fragment to a larger insight is a conceptual and theoretical one and not a form of generalization. It does not come from mere observation, but is theory-laden. Theory should here be taken in its original sense of observing and contemplating.

This is not theory as generalization, like in "a general theory of action" (Parsons) or a "theory of practice" (Bourdieu). Therefore I take the concept of *holism* to refer not to the ethnographical method per se, but to anthropology as a conceptual engagement, in which translation plays a central role. Some observational methods in micro-sociology, urban geography, and actor-oriented political science resemble the ethnographic method, but do not share the radically different theoretical orientation of anthropology. Its basic starting point is to question the universality of what in modern society is taken to constitute the separate domains of the economy, of politics, of law, and of religion as well as the dichotomy between state and society or between the individual and society, or even between inner feelings and outward appearance. In fact, these pervasive dichotomous conceptualizations have a particular history in modern Western societies and languages. The holistic perspective of anthropology allows us to bracket Western assumptions and investigate how people outside of the modern West are conceptualizing their social life without presuming the universality of Western understandings.

My approach raises two related issues. First of all, nobody today is totally outside "the modern West," because in fact we are all "becoming modern" (Latour 1993) and because Western modernity is one among many modernities (Eisenstadt 2000). Moreover, there is a history of a century or longer of Western hegemony in the world. This makes it impossible to assume that there is a "pure outside" that can be investigated. Instead what we study are various forms of interaction between different cultural worlds that are in some cases of very long duration (Gibson 2007) and in some cases have a nineteenth-century origin (van der Veer 2001). In the latter cases we deal with imperial interactions that engender modern transformations. We find interactions also *within* societies, such as, for example, the "split public" of the English-speaking public in India and the much larger vernacular public (Rajagopal 2001), or the ethnic majority-ethnic minorities opposition in contemporary Europe. In fact, there is such a great variety of cultural exchanges and interactions that it is not possible to think of society as an integrated whole.

Secondly, by acknowledging this history of interactions we turn a critical eye on universal pretensions of models that are solely based on a putatively isolated Western historical experience. The pervasiveness of ethnocentrism in the social sciences is astonishing, ranging from discussions of democracy, public sphere and civil society to discussions of religion, secularism, class and the family. One of the greatest flaws in the development of a comparative perspective seems to be the almost universal comparison of any existing society with an ideal-typical and totally self-sufficient Euro-American modernity.

Comparison should not be conceived primarily in terms of comparing societies or events, or institutional arrangements across societies, although this is important, but as a reflection on our conceptual framework as well as on the history of interactions that have constituted our object of study. That critical reflection often shows that Western concepts do not fit the social reality that one wants to investigate which, in turn, may lead to the exaggerated claim that societies outside the West should be understood in their own terms, and cannot be understood in Western terms. However, one cannot escape the fact that in today's world "native" terms have to be interpreted and translated in relation to Western scholarship. Moreover, such translation and interpretation is part of a long history of interactions with the West that has become dominant in the nineteenth century.

Any attempt to make a sharp (often nationalist) demarcation of inside and outside is spurious in contemporary society. Comparison is thus not a relatively simple juxtaposition and comparison of two or more different societies, but a complex reflection on the network of concepts that underlie our study of society as well as the formation of those societies themselves. It is always a double act of reflection (van der Veer 2013).

This is not to say that Western ideas and models are not powerful. Again, what needs to be studied are forms of interaction, since no one can deny, for example, the significance and power of universal models in economics for economic policy everywhere. Such models function both as "models of" and "models for" (Geertz 1973), since global institutions like IMF and the World Bank impose their models on societies (with sometimes disastrous effects, as in the "Asian Crisis," see Stiglitz 2002). It is not that these models are universally applicable (on the basis of the assumption that we all are in the same world and are all human beings), but that they are *universalized* and thus have a universal impact to the extent that they are backed by global power. What anthropological discussions of the informal economy and of corruption have taught us is that these models are partly uncovering reality and partly covering it up and that that is their universal characteristic.

The anthropological lens enables a critique of universal modeling and is, by consequence, outside of the mainstream of the development of social science. The orientation towards comparative sociology in the era of Empire has shifted after World War II to a focus on differences within national societies in the West (Connell 1997). The dominant trend in sociology is to study one's own society and, thus American sociology studies the US, the world's dominant society. The silent assumption of those who think that sociology is a form of universal science is that what is true for the US is true everywhere. Much of sociology and political science today is macro-oriented, depends on large data sets, and is geared to constructing universally applicable models. While quantitative analysis is certainly an important way to increase our knowledge about longitudinal trends and patterns in society students of societies like India and China tend to have doubts about the validity of surveys and data sets. As the Nobel prize-winning economist Paul Krugman put it recently in a characteristically scathing opinion piece: "All economic data are best viewed as a peculiarly boring genre of science fiction, but



Chinese data are even more fictional than most.” (“Hitting China’s Wall,” *New York Times*, July 18, 2013). To stay with the example of the so-called informal economy, statistics based on the formal economy in many societies are clearly partial and in India and China they miss a large chunk of reality, although we cannot say for sure how large for the reasons outlined above. In my own field of the study of religion, statistics gathered on the growth of Christianity in China, for instance, have to be regarded with as much suspicion as, for example, statistics on sexual behavior in any country have to be regarded. More generally, one needs to examine survey data with great methodological care, since nonresponse is often extremely high and responses can be socially acceptable ones that have little to do with reality. Despite the enormous importance and investment in electoral research the outcome of elections is so hard to predict that only late in election night Karl Rove (American presidential candidate Mitt Romney’s numbers man) was forced to admit that Obama was comfortably winning the elections despite all his surveys pointing in another direction. This should not lead to the lament that the social sciences are not quite science as yet, since sciences like geology and meteorology cannot predict earthquakes or the weather either. Similarly brain research is making progress thanks to new observational technologies, but despite huge claims by neuroscientists we still know very little about the brain. One should perhaps acknowledge that instead of the great divide between science and social science (and the humanities) we are dealing with a great number of different pursuits of knowledge and evidentiary practices and arenas of argumentation that are methodologically and theoretically wide apart without the possibility of making one successful research paradigm the model for others.

Comparisons based on large data sets have great and perhaps unsolvable problems. An example is the work done by the comparativists Ronald Inglehart (Michigan) and Pippa Norris (Harvard) based on a *Survey of world values*. It strikes the anthropologist immediately that to identify China, Korea, and Japan as “Confucian” mistakes a history of cultural exchanges for a shared system of values. Similar mistakes are made by leading political scientists like the late Samuel Huntington in his *Clash of civilizations* or by Peter Katzenstein in recent work on East Asia. There is a serious lack of historical understanding at work when one thinks that Confucianism is a coherent system of values and that a core value like filial piety does not change when family arrangements change as a result of government interventions (anti-feudalism campaigns by the Chinese communists as well as the one-child policy in China) or demographic changes (dramatic in Japan, Korea, and Taiwan). Finally, the notion that these societies are characterized by Confucianism ignores the impact of other value orientations, such as Buddhism, Daoism, Shintoism, Christianity, and, last but not least, Communism. What happens in these large comparative data-sets is a totally different form of “holism” than the anthropological one and perhaps better called “wholism” that does not research the various ways in which people think that parts make up a whole, but starts with the assumption of a society as a unified whole. This allows for type-casting societies and religions in a particular unifying way. It is the macrosociological form of ethnic profiling. This continues a tradition in American anthropology that aimed at determining the *culture and per-*

sonality of an entire society (Benedict, Linton, Kardiner, Hsu). The desire to do this has both disciplinary and political origins and consequences.

What I have said just now should not at all be taken as an argument against comparison. In fact, social and cultural analysis is always within a comparative frame. Some of us are acutely aware of this; others less so. In general there is inadequate consideration of the extent to which our approaches depend on arguing and comparing with the already existing literature on a topic, on the use of terms that have emerged in entirely different historical situations and thus convey implicit comparison (such as “middle class” or “bourgeoisie” or “religion”), and also on the ways in which the people we study themselves are constantly comparing the present with the past or their situation with that of others. To therefore claim that one is a Sinologist or an Indologist or an Africanist and believe that specialization in a region and subject, given sufficient linguistic and cultural competence, is enough to claim mastery over that subject, as if one is not standing constantly in a reflexive relation to both discipline and subject, gives perhaps a certain confidence, but is untenable.

It is in the light of the importance of comparative analysis that anthropology needs to interact with other social science disciplines (J. Goody). However, the question is whether anthropology should only function as critique, as correcting overgeneralizations from the margins. I would propose that there is a more positive role to play for anthropology as a producer of valid knowledge through comparison. It can go beyond methodological and theoretical nationalism, not only by examining the marginal, the transient, the betwixt and between, but also by comparing concepts of personhood, of nation and civilization. In that sense it may offer an alternative to research that takes these concepts as unproblematic, empirical objects.

While the ethnographic method sensitizes us to anthropological holism, brings us closer to popular experiences of the everyday state and allows us to better analyze what “seeing like a state” (Scott 1998) implies for actors in a society, anthropological holism is, as suggested before, a theoretical perspective that goes beyond the ethnographic method. Most fruitfully it addresses the conceptual issues that have concerned comparative sociology from its French, German, and British beginnings. In the larger chapter from which this lecture is an excerpt, I want to explore anthropology’s comparative advantage in the study of three major topics that are of crucial importance in contemporary, complex society: social inequality, nationalism, and religion. Today I will limit myself to some observations about (1) social inequality and (2) religion. In this exploration, I want to oppose holism to wholism, oppose interpretation to coding, and finally oppose cultural analysis to sociobiology.

Social inequality

Louis Dumont has argued that traditional India was characterized by a hierarchical value system and that it was very difficult for social scientists that had been socialized in an egalitarian value system to really understand India. His comparative perspective allowed Dumont to ask penetrating questions about the differences between caste, class, and race, about the position of “the individual” as a



normative subject in Indian society, about the relation between religious status and temporal power. Many of his answers to these questions have been successfully challenged in subsequent empirical work. The fundamental problem with Dumont's perspective is that he uses anthropological holism to ask fundamental questions, but ends up positing an Indian "whole" as distinct from a Western "whole," creating artificial unities over time and space. While we have to reject this wholism, Dumont, nevertheless, asks the important question whether modern categories of time and space can be indiscriminately applied to conceptualizations of them that are fundamentally different. Dumont has in regard to these categories rightly argued that the Hindu conceptualization of history is radically different from the modern, Western one (and one might add, from the Islamic one that one also finds in India) and that this creates particular problems for the historical study of Indian society. At the same time, it has to be acknowledged that by focusing on Hindu history Dumont has effectively disregarded the historical impact of Islamic and British colonial power. Such strategic isolations of parts of history are useful for constructing Weberian ideal-types, but may hinder the understanding of a history of interactions.

The anthropology of India has somewhat moved away from the study of caste after the publication of Arjun Appadurai's critique of caste studies and the general rise of cultural studies focusing on youth culture, film studies as well as that of the study of various forms of nationalism. This shift in anthropological attention does not imply that the social phenomenon has become less important. Caste continues to be a major component of Indian politics and society. It tends to be central in social competition for scarce resources, distributed by political authorities, and especially in reservation policies. It is also central in the social exclusion of a major part (between fifteen and twenty percent and if one also adds the scheduled tribes around a fourth) of the Indian population, the so-called Untouchables or Dalits. Urbanization shows this continuing pattern of exclusion very clearly, since a large part of the slum population is Dalit.

I do think that Dumont's general theory has been able to offer an important insight on the differences between caste and race by using a comparative approach. He has argued that Indian caste is different from American race since caste depends on a hierarchical ideology, while race depends on an egalitarian ideology. These are two systems of inequality that resemble each other but are, in Dumont's view, fundamentally different, since they are related to opposite value systems. Let us examine this argument a bit further. Obviously, there are significant differences between the systems at the level of observation, such as the proliferation of castes in the Indian case and the existence of two castes (black and white) in the American case. Nevertheless, Dumont's assumption that India's hierarchical ideology is a *shared* all-encompassing system of values is deeply problematic. That would only be true if Untouchables would accept the values of the caste system, but, as Gerald Berreman (1960) already argued from his field work in North India, they do not. Robert Deliège (1999: 69–70) takes a middle position on the basis of his fieldwork in South India and has suggested that Untouchables are "both the victims and the agents of the caste system, its defenders and its enemies." This can perhaps be seen as a general feature of a functioning

hierarchical system as explained in Hegel's master-slave dialectic. It can be safely said, however, that, whatever may have been the case in the past, at least at the political level today Untouchables see themselves as oppressed by adopting the name *Dalits* (oppressed) and rejecting the term that Gandhi coined for them, *Harijans* (children of God). The ethnographic finding of reproduction of hierarchical values among Dalits does not mean that they are unaware of being oppressed. As many anthropologists have been arguing, the category of resistance is too simple to capture a wide variety of relations to power. It is the comparison of race and caste that allows for examining some of these subtleties without reducing them to the opposition of hierarchy and egalitarianism (cf. Fuller 2011).

While there are myriad caste distinctions in India that make one think of it as a unique social system, the divide between people who have caste and those who are outcast resembles the Black-White opposition in the American South till the 1960s. In both cases, one can observe important class and ethnic divisions among the dominant population, but a more definite cleavage between White and Black, or between caste people and outcasts. The extent to which this cleavage is reproduced even under changing political conditions, in which one has a Black President in the United States and an Untouchable one in India, is an intriguing question. In the United States it is the stunning incarceration rate among black men that shows the persistence of a deep inequality; while in India the fact that the majority of so-called slum-dwellers are Dalit demonstrates a similar persistence of the old discrimination. Similar, however, is not the same. The comparative approach makes it productive to inquire why race expresses itself in the United States through criminalization and violence, whereas in India it expresses itself through the denial of basic state services.

What makes the comparison between racial discrimination in the United States and untouchability in India even more productive is that they are both rooted in systems of slavery. The patterns of abolishment of slavery are connected to the emergence of new labor conditions which produces a black underclass and an untouchable footloose labor force. The memory of slavery and the representation of suffering in performative traditions are powerful elements in the unification of these underclasses. In both the United States and India these classes have produced new religious forms of organization and ritual representation. It is especially the role of missionary Christianity in India and that of the black churches in the United States that invites comparative work. It is evident that Christian churches play an outsized role in the organization of social life in the slums and ghettos, but at the same time Christianity is part of the ideological core of American nationalism while it is seen as foreign in India. It is much easier for dominant society in India to delegitimize Christian churches than for dominant society in the United States, although one needs to keep in mind that radical Black Christianity is not part of mainstream Christianity, as Obama found out when his pastor Jeremiah Wright got some intense media attention for what were seen as anti-American and anti-White positions.

The question whether it is productive to think of caste in terms of race is not a purely academic or scientific one. This emerged clearly at the United Nations World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Re-



lated Intolerance (WCAR) held in South Africa in September 2001. The NGO Conference that preceded the official meeting of government representatives had a 160 member Dalit caucus, representing Untouchables in South Asia, but also in Japan and Senegal. The government of India, however, strongly rejected the claim that caste discrimination of the Dalit population should be regarded as racial discrimination and successfully prevented it to be part of the concluding document of the conference.

The comparative anthropological (and historical) interpretation of these forms of inequality in their cultural and institutional context has great social science value and helps us to ask better questions than allowed by the construction of taxonomies of social inequality, in which class, caste, and race are conceptualized as ideal-types or by the construction of Western and non-Western social systems that are characterized by totalizing ideologies.

Religion

A second area of inquiry that I want to discuss in this exploration of the comparative advantage of the anthropological perspective is religion. From Durkheim and Weber onwards the emphasis in the social science study of religion has been on the social. This emphasis does not exclude the body, but sees “the individual” and “experience” as a social construction that is different from culture to culture and thus focuses on the social disciplining of the body in the context of societal evolution. This has been brilliantly explored by Marcel Mauss (1973) in his essay on “Techniques of the body,” in which he developed a theory of habitus, or “acquired ability,” which emphasizes acquisition by learning and then embodied practice.

Today, however, there is a strong movement in current anthropology that moves away from the social. At first glance it seems to continue this focus on the body and on learning (sometimes with reference to Mauss), but it does so from an evolutionist perspective that privileges cognitive and biological aspects above the social. This research direction universalizes its findings on the basis that we all have a body and especially a brain (see the work of Maurice Bloch).

A century after Durkheim’s rejection of psychology’s attempts to understand society we see the successful expansion of psychological perspectives that are cloaked in the authority of evolutionary cognitive science, enabled by new techniques of brain research. Again we have a comparative enterprise here. The task for evolutionary anthropology is to find through cross-cultural comparison explanations for variations in culture, given the universality of the human body. The principles are the same as in evolutionary biology: searching for patterns of adaptation to the environment in terms of the survival of the fittest.

Biologists have been successful in showing some continuity in the behavior of the great apes and humans in simple forms of bodily gesture and response, but have been unable to resolve totally opposite observations on morality and forms of cooperation in comparisons of chimpanzees and young children (e.g., Michael Tomasello of Max Planck and Frans de Waal of Emory, both leading researchers in this field). If one reflects for a moment on the conceptual difficulties in connecting empathy (from the German, *Einfühlung*) to moral decision making in

humans than one can appreciate the problems in judging animal behavior (Kogut and Kogut 2013). Despite these inconclusive debates there is widespread enthusiasm to use evolutionary biology in the interpretation of human society. Marshall Sahlins (1976: 101) has usefully shown how these arguments are rooted in Western philosophical preoccupations: “Since the seventeenth century we seem to have been caught up in this vicious cycle, alternately applying the model of capitalist society to the animal kingdom, then reapplying this bourgeoisified animal kingdom to the interpretation of human society.”

The most important uncharted territory is that of the higher functions of the brain, as manifested in language and religion. However, despite considerable efforts in the area of language there is no convincing account of the evolution of language. Also all attempts to teach apes language have failed (e.g. Allen and Beatrix Gardner’s Project Washoe and Herbert Terrace’s Project Nim Chimpsky). These failures and the considerable controversies about relatively simple issues like sharing and cooperation among evolutionary anthropologists seem not to deter them to explore one of the most complex fields of human behavior: religion.

We have only time for one example, namely the measuring of the skills that people acquire to “hear God.” Tanya Luhrmann, Howard Nusbaum, and Ronald Thisted (2010) have recently examined “absorption” in experience of God. Luhrmann is a distinguished university professor at Stanford, a previous Morgan lecturer, her latest book was featured in the *New Yorker* and she has an invited column in the *New York Times*. Her starting-point is evolutionary: “beliefs in invisible intentional beings are so widespread because they are a byproduct of intuitive human reasoning (and) the biases in these intuitions evolved to enable us to survive.” She quotes with approval Stewart Guthrie (1995) who argues that we see faces in the clouds, because it was adaptive for our ancestors to interpret ambiguous sounds as “potential threats.” Despite these rhetorical nods to evolutionary theory her work on “hearing god” does not engage evolution but deals with an interesting ethnographic puzzle, namely the fact that some people are more able to experience god than others. Luhrmann points out that the ability to experience god has to do with frequency of prayer and thus with a process of learning. I do not find that surprising, since in my Protestant youth it was already said by my elders that I should pray harder if I wanted to believe in God. What is more interesting is to find out why some are better at it than others, the question of talents or individual difference, similar to what Paul Radin (1937) called the conundrum of the “primitive man as philosopher.”

According to Luhrmann, intense experiences of god are “technically hallucinations.” She puts religious experiences on a scale with light forms of self-absorption to psychotic hallucinations. However, she does not explain the difference in talent to experience god nor does she explain how training creates experience in a systematic way, although this is the stated (and interesting) aim of her research. She basically reiterates the generally accepted fact that cultural behavior has to be learned, but cloaks this in a quasi-scientific, experimental language that uses an existing hypnosis-hallucination scale, developed by psychologists, for measuring people’s “proclivity” to experience god.



Luhrmann seems to be primarily interested in hallucinations, sensory experiences without a material source, like hearing the voice of god. She interprets these as “mistakes.” In her view this is similar but different from psychosis, because they do not cause substantial impairment and seem to come from cultural expectations. Again, the focus is here on learning to experience, but since this goes for all experience and not only for learning to hallucinate, as it were, it is unclear whether what she argues is anything more than the old anthropological adage “culture is learned behavior” (Kroeber).

My conclusion is that evolutionary and experimental psychology is not going to be of a great help in understanding religion if it remains tied to Western nineteenth-century prejudices and to exclusive research on Western populations. Joseph Henrich, Steven Heine, and Ara Norenzayan (2010: 61) conclude on the basis of extensive research on data banks that “behavioral scientists routinely publish broad claims about human psychology and behavior in the world's top journals based on samples drawn entirely from Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic (WEIRD) societies. Researchers—often implicitly—assume that either there is little variation across human populations, or that these ‘standard subjects’ are as representative of the species as any other population.”

Conclusion

The arguments that are represented here constitute an *apologia pro anthropologia*. This is necessary in the light of the marginalization of cultural anthropology in the social and behavioral sciences. In spite of the increasing economic integration of the world there is a continuing Western ethnocentrism in research. Theoretically and methodologically this is characterized by generalization inherent in quantitative sociological models, universalism inherent in psychological models, and in the essentialization of society. Practically it is characterized by the overwhelming number of empirical studies on the West and the relative dearth of such studies in the Rest. Given the social power of abstract models in policy making it is essential for the social sciences to have a counterforce in anthropology.

Let me summarize briefly what in my view is the comparative advantage of anthropology: (1) Anthropology is primarily an engagement with difference and diversity and focuses on problems of cultural translation. As such it offers a critique of the universalization of Western models. (2) A necessarily fragmentary, but holistic approach to social life offers a greater potential for social science than the analysis of large data, undergirded by game theory and rational choice theory. (3) “Wholism” as the assumption of integration of nations and civilizations is different from anthropological holism which implies the drawing of larger inferences from the intensive study of fragments of social life. (4) The anthropological contribution to the study of embodied practice emphasizes the social and provides a critique of sociobiological determinism which is full of Euro-American prejudice. An emphasis on the body and its disciplining requires an attention to configurations of power that cannot be replaced by psychological experiments or tests.

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