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# Introduction

## In Search of a New Paradigm

Guy G. Stroumsa

Since their birth in the seventeenth century, the modern humanistic disciplines, like the natural sciences, have been fascinated by comparison. Comparing the structure and evolution of languages, cultures, legal systems, scientific traditions, mythologies, and societies has always been as much an effort in detecting differences as in seeking similarities. These nascent disciplines were the offspring of the puzzlement generated by the discovery of new cultures and societies. The comparative element gathered momentum in the nineteenth century, starting with linguistics, under the impact of Franz Bopp's seminal studies on the grammar of the Indo-European languages. Comparative studies reached their zenith toward the end of that century, when the British Empire, in particular, encouraged comparison between political and legal systems and literary, artistic, and religious traditions (e.g., between India and Europe).

The comparative ethos survived the twentieth century. Yet the contemporary push, everywhere evident, to demarcate departmental boundaries and stress specific training has acted as a powerful brake on comparative research. Under such conditions, the comparative approach is more marginal than central in most branches of scholarly inquiry and education.

From our early twenty-first century perspective, we are critically aware of the dangers of the hyper-specialization that has become the norm across disciplines. The world in which we now live (a main characteristic of which is the use of English as a new *koinē*, with its corollary the weakening of other linguistic scholarly traditions, such as German and French) and which we call "global," seems to be more and more a flat world, where differences are overlooked or misunderstood. In such an environment, comparative studies are confronted with new challenges and an assessment of their achievements and limitations constitutes a new, urgent desideratum.

More than a century ago, universities inherited the separation of faculties and the differentiation of disciplines from Wilhelm von Humboldt. Nonetheless, serious attempts to bridge the emerging fields have been made at least since the second half of the nineteenth century. As an epistemological paradigm, comparing is of course as old as thought itself. The golden age of imperialism and colonialism, in particular, promoted the comparative method. Great discoveries fostered the comparative study of vastly different societies in the fields of languages, literatures, legal and economic systems, social organization, history, and the arts. The use made of the comparative method by the natural sciences, moreover, which proved highly successful from a heuristic viewpoint, had a direct, profound impact on the humanities. Hence, even before the curtain closed on the nineteenth century, the comparative approach had penetrated academia. In some cases, it succeeded in gaining official status. Hence, Comparative Religion (*Vergleichende Religionswissenschaft*) and Comparative Literature became distinct university departments where different religions or literatures were studied together, with the goal of identifying patterns of similarity and difference. In fields such as law, politics, and history, the comparative method never quite attained such recognition. Yet throughout the twentieth century it held a certain stature, while remaining an exotic appendix of sorts to the core of scholarly activity.

Alongside the explicit aims of the comparative method are other aims, more implicit but no less important. In assessing comparative efforts, several questions ought to be posed: Who compares what? Which tools are to be selected for the comparison? And, more fundamentally, why compare at all? Two opposing approaches vie for primacy here: one is the search for similarities between the *comparanda*; the other is the search for meaningful differences. Taking a cue from John Stuart Mill, who long ago discussed two distinct methods of comparison, one can juxtapose the “method of agreement” to the “method of difference.”<sup>1</sup> The choice of trend tends to reflect unspoken assumptions. For instance, in interfaith practice, similarities are sought between religions while deep differences are often ignored outright. In other contexts, civilizations, or elements thereof, have long been compared in an effort to establish a hierarchy of cultural value; this was a favored tactic of European imperialists, who used comparison as a tool of colonial domination. Such practices reflect a conception of comparatism as an ideology (seeking

1 See the discussion of this point in Kocka 2003.

either to rank cultures or to erase differences between them) rather than as an investigative approach. They left a long shadow before the comparative method, now deemed of dubious scholarly merit.

To these stains upon the comparative approach were added other problems, which contributed to a loss of its prestige and a deprecation of its use. Foremost among these are the depth and breadth of knowledge necessary in order to compare cultures properly. Mastery of multiple languages demands a huge investment of time and effort, hardly encouraged under the current conditions of academia. The dramatic accumulation of knowledge and of the sheer number of scholars has meant a radical demand for early specialization. “Knowing more and more about less and less,” as the painful adage goes (painful because it touches raw nerves), has also meant, *inter alia*, the demise of “romantic” attempts at broad comparisons between cultures. Herein lies a paradox: the more focused (read: limited) one’s own field of expertise becomes, the greater the need to see the work being done in – to compare with – other fields. And the more that following this path becomes an imperative, the less it seems to be trodden.

The well-known crisis of the Humanities has been amply addressed. Suffice to say that it was sparked by the information technology revolution as well as by dramatic changes that have taken place in the organization of societies in general and in the sociology of knowledge in particular. Most of all, this crisis reflects the shrinking of the world. The term “global village” only imperfectly conveys our contemporary conditions. Yet the entanglement of societies, cultures, languages, and religions in so many mega-cities does signal that the activity of comparison, with its assumption of distinct and delimited comparative terms, has become highly problematic. Comparative studies, if they wish to respect the subjects of inquiry, must confront the problem of the incomparable (*das Unvergleichbare*) – the element of singularity inherent to any human phenomenon.

Arguably, globalization is responsible for the success of the cognitive sciences as a prevailing paradigm. The cognitive paradigm, based as it is on the unitary nature of the human mind, seems to detract from the importance of cultural difference. As such, it vitiates the value of the comparative project.

The present imbroglio has had a powerful impact on our patterns of thought, even when we deal with the past and/or with traditional societies. The heuristic power of the comparative method has been placed into serious question. In such a situation, even authoritative calls to

tackle comparison too often fall upon deaf ears. Retreating to the traditional disciplines or fleeing into various post-modern approaches is easier, perhaps more appealing.

“Why compare?” “What is gained from comparison?” Such questions imply that comparison is a threat to the traditional disciplines, ensconced within clear boundaries, not to be trespassed. To them, one might answer that, like all intellectual moves, comparison is most valuable when it is not obvious. Of course, “not obvious” does not mean “oblivious”: scholars ought to be aware of their assumptions and attuned to how those assumptions frame the comparison.

There are different kinds of comparative cultures, just as there are moments in which certain types of comparison are more natural or more convincing. For the comparative study of religion, for instance, I have proposed to speak about a “magical moment” in the last decades of the nineteenth century and in the first decades of the twentieth. Later on, the comparative ethos, without disappearing, seems to weaken considerably.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, one can speak of synchronic as well as diachronic comparison. One may even entertain the idea of drawing a genealogy of comparatists.

Since Herodotus, history has been a comparative activity. Yet the default option always involves studying the past of one (and it is usually one’s own) society. From time to time, we hear a call to undertake with due respect the comparative task. One may refer here to Marc Bloch’s work on the cusp of the Second World War, or to the recent, powerful demonstration of the worth of comparative history made by Sir John Elliott.<sup>3</sup> Today, it would seem that Sanjay Subrahmanyam’s concept of “connected history” succeeds in affirming the dynamic and integrative character of comparing societies in their historical, contextual interface.<sup>4</sup> One wonders whether broadening such a concept to fit disciplines other than history may not put us on the right track in our search for a new paradigm of comparison between societies and cultures.

The chapters in this book were originally presented at a German-Israeli conference celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between Israel and Germany. The conference,

2 See Stroumsa forthcoming.

3 See Bloch 2006. See further Elliott 2006, and *idem* 2012, esp. chap. 5.

4 See, e.g., Subrahmanyam 2005. Cf. the French concept of *histoires croisées*, which covers much of the same semantic field.

entitled “Comparative Studies in the Twenty-First Century: Prospects and Pitfalls,” was held in Jerusalem at the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities on October 12–14, 2015, and was co-sponsored by the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation and the Israel Academy.

Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan’s discussion of Comparative Literature as a field of study and a method of research, some fifty years ago and today, presents the question at hand very well. *Mutatis mutandis*, her approach could be applied to other fields. Indeed, it is a proposal originally made by historians, one that entails combining the comparison of distinct phenomena and the study of entangled ones, which strikes her as potentially fruitful for the study of literature. Cedric Cohen Skalli, for his part, compares two contemporaneous patterns of literary approach in early twentieth-century Germany, and their philosophical underpinnings and implications. In doing so, he spotlights a particular moment in attitudes to the translation of poetry. In “Comparing Slavery,” Youval Rotman offers a sophisticated treatment of diachronic and synchronic comparison, showing the linkage between historical and anthropological research. The two articles of Hans van Ess and Ori Sela deal with China. While the former discusses historical phenomena in China and in the West (e.g., the Roman Empire), Sela shows that a comparative reflection on China and India opens fresh perspectives. He argues that “thinking-with-comparisons” is essential from a heuristic viewpoint in order to develop a better understanding of a culture. Considering the religious and intellectual history of medieval Andalus, Sarah Stroumsa first shows how Jewish and Muslim intellectuals shared a comparative approach. She then offers a convincing claim that only by studying their writings side by side can we draw an accurate image of a multi-religious society. Jörg Rüpke considers the modern study of religion, disclosing how the role and status of the comparative method has evolved in this field since the late nineteenth century. Affirming that substantial problems currently impede the use of the comparative method, he suggests an intriguing strategy to overcome such difficulties. Christoph Marksches reviews late ancient Manichaeism as a universal religion constituted by comparative elements. He then demonstrates that only a comparative vantage point can do justice to this highly complex religious system.

The last three studies compare German and Israeli phenomena. Juxtaposing the musical traditions in Germany and Palestine/Israel in the twentieth century, Ruth HaCohen, who delivered the keynote address at the conference, insists on the transmission of knowledge



(with the Jewish emigration from Germany to Mandatory Palestine due to the rise of Nazism) and shows how the prism of “intercontextuality” helps us to properly understand the valence of such transmission. Nili Cohen and Marc-Philippe Weller treat aspects of the interface of law between Germany and Israel. Cohen analyzes some important ways in which German law has impacted upon private and public law in Israel. Weller, for his part, adduces cases that demonstrate how German courts deal with questions stemming from Jewish law (such as Jewish divorce laws and circumcision).

Chris Thomale, Professor Weller’s assistant at the time, contributes what he calls “a lawyer’s epilogue.” His short text offers a fair echo of the conference as it was perceived *in situ* and affords the reader a hint of the provocative discussions that took place.

Yet, then and now, we are not reaching for an overarching vision of comparative studies. Rather, we have sought to begin a conversation among practitioners of different disciplines. Such a discussion requires periodic rekindling in our search for a new paradigm.

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