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Two Ways to Compare

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In taking up the task of "rethinking comparison in the social sciences," we might gainfully ask a basic, but not-too-often posed, question: What are the different ways to compare?

Or to rephrase the query more precisely: What are the different ways in which we ordinarily use the word "compare"? My aim in posing this question is to bring into clearer view a way of comparing that, despite being both common and integral to the social sciences, often goes unnoticed. By drawing attention to it, I hope to provide social scientists with a set of starting points to think more clearly about the comparisons they make and to expand their imagination about the kinds of comparing that are possible.

Juxtapositional vs. Perspectival Comparison

A cursory look at most any grammar book reveals, in fact, two distinct uses of "compare." On the one hand, to compare can mean to juxtapose similar kinds of things in order to estimate or catalog their similarities and/or differences.[1] We can thus compare one person with another and describe how they stack up against each other with regard to wit, height, wealth, education, or the like. One can similarly compare one country with another, one revolution with another, or one social movement with another. We might call this way of comparing "juxtapositional."

On the other hand, to compare can mean to draw an analogy between two different kinds of things, to liken one kind of thing to a different kind of thing. When we compare the moon to Swiss cheese, we show how one kind of thing (the moon) is like a different kind of thing (Swiss cheese). One might similarly compare the moon to a traveler who journeys across the sky, a parent who tucks a child into bed, or a beacon that shines at night. Sometimes when we compare dissimilar things, the analogy is made explicit by the use of simile (e.g., the moon is *like* a piece of cheese). At other times, the analogy is more hidden or implied and takes the form of metaphor (e.g., the moon *is* a piece of cheese). To speak of politics in terms of carpentry—as Max Weber ([1919]1946, 128) did when he famously described politics as "a strong and slow boring of hard boards"–is but one example of comparing dissimilar things by means of metaphor.[2]

When we compare dissimilar things, we show the relationship between them. What Kenneth Burke (1941, 421–22) wrote about metaphor holds for comparing dissimilar things more generally: "It brings out the thisness of a that, or the thatness of a this." In comparing the moon to Swiss cheese, we bring out the cheese-like qualities of the moon. In comparing politics to carpentry, Weber brings out the carpenter-like dispositions that someone with the vocation of politics should possess. Because comparing dissimilar things involves bringing out the thisness of a that or the thatness of a this, we might say that it establishes, to again borrow from Burke, a "perspective" (1941, 422). It uses cheese as a vantage point from which to view and gain perspective on the moon or carpentry as a vantage point from which to view and gain perspective on politics. For this reason, we might call this way of comparing "perspectival."

We have, then, two ways to compare. To compare juxtapositionally is to place similar kinds of things side by side in order to catalog their similarities and differences. To compare perspectivally is to draw an analogy between different kinds of things as a way to establish a vantage point from which to view one thing in terms of the other. When "compare" is used in its juxtapositional sense, we can say either compare "with" or compare "to." When the term is used in its perspectival sense, we more typically say compare "to." When astronomers juxtapositionally compare the moon with planet Earth, they estimate the similarities and differences between the two celestial bodies with regard to mass, diameter, chemical composition, gravitational pull, and the like. When the poet Nicholas Vachel Lindsay (1913) perspectivally compares the moon to a city, he brings out the cityness of the moon, with its "yellow palaces upreared upon a glittering ground."

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[1] Here and in what follows I use "things" in a colloquial, encompassing sense. The term includes not only material objects but also events, actions, processes, practices, experiences and the like.

[2] The comparative dimension of metaphor becomes more evident when contrasting metaphoric and literal utterances. The metaphoric "The moon is a piece of cheese" can be reworded as "The moon is like a piece of cheese" and still make sense. The literal "Red is a color," in contrast, cannot be rendered as "Red is like a color"–such an utterance is nonsensical (Carston 2002, 358). The point is that metaphors can be turned into explicit comparisons whereas literal utterances cannot. This is not to claim that metaphor and simile function identically, but only to call attention to the fact that both involve comparison. For more on the comparative dimension of metaphor, see Perrine (1971). On the differences between metaphor and simile, and the more complicated relationship of metaphor to comparison, see Glucksberg and Haught (2006).

The difference between the two ways of comparing is also revealed in the popular warning against comparing "apples to oranges"—or "grandmothers to toads," as the saying apparently goes in Serbian. Whatever the language, this idiom admonishes against juxtapositionally comparing things that are deemed to belong to different categories. Such a warning would be misinvoked when comparing perspectivally. Indeed, a perspectival comparison *requires* comparing things deemed to belong to different categories—comparing, say, the moon to cheese, or grandmothers to toads.

I repeat "deemed to" because, as we have learned from Nelson Goodman, "anything is in some way like anything else" (1972, 440). Depending on the interests of the person doing the comparing, the same pair of things can be deemed to belong to either the same or different categories. Apple farmers concerned with the yields of assorted varieties of that fruit might deem oranges to belong to a different category that holds little interest to them. For them to juxtapositionally compare apples to oranges might make little sense. Nutritionists, in contrast, may well want to juxtapositionally compare apples to oranges so that they can estimate the vitamin content of various types of fruit that might be included in school lunches. We could also imagine evolutionary biologists taking an interest in comparing juxtapositionally the DNA of toads and grandmothers, or astrobiologists wanting to compare juxtapositionally the molecular compounds present in both cheese and the moon. There is, to repeat, nothing intrinsically similar or dissimilar about any two things. We must be careful, then, not to reify or naturalize our categories: we come *up* with similarities, not *across* them. But once we deem things to be similar or dissimilar, to belong to the same or different categories, juxtapositional comparison requires comparing like to like, whereas perspectival comparison requires comparing like to unlike.

Juxtapositional and Perspectival Comparison in the Social Sciences

Social scientists who offer methodological advice about comparing usually focus their attention on working out how to compare juxtapositionally. Much of this advice comes from scholars operating within the positivist tradition. To ensure that apples are being compared to apples and oranges to oranges, that whatever is being compared actually belongs to the same category, some positivist methodologists develop guidelines for creating categories that are well-demarcated, a task that often goes by the name of "concept formation" (see, e.g., Sartori 1970). To increase confidence that the particular cases chosen for study actually belong in those categories, that clear procedures exist to help correctly categorize this piece of fruit as an apple and that piece of fruit as an orange, other positivist methodologists offer guidance on "operationalization" and "measurement" (see, e.g., Schoenberg 1972). To provide reasoned criteria for deciding which particular apples, among the entire universe of apples, are selected for juxtapositional comparison, still others attend to "sampling" or "case selection" (see, e.g., Ebbinghaus 2005).

Advice from interpretivist scholars on how to compare juxtapositionally often differs. Some interpretivists, for instance, argue that the construction of well-demarcated concepts is not necessary for juxtapositional comparison (see, e.g., Schaffer 2016, 59–64). Other interpretivists offer guidance on case selection that overlaps only partially with the advice given by positivists (see, e.g., Simmons and Smith 2017). Yet others argue that juxtapositional comparison can or should rest not on a selection of cases posited to exist in the world, but rather on a constructive casing of the world (see, e.g., Soss 2018 in this symposium). But whatever differences exist in how positivist and interpretivist scholars typically approach juxtapositional comparison, the fact remains that this way of comparing is crucial to both.

Because John Stuart Mill's *Logic of the Moral Sciences* has become a reference point for many social scientists who today write about comparing, it is perhaps worth pointing out that his method of difference and his method of agreement are both modes of juxtapositional comparison. It is not the case that the method of difference is juxtapositional and the method of agreement perspectival. Both methods compare things that are deemed to belong to a single category. In Mill's own example, the category was that of "nation." To see whether the wealth of nations is a result of their commercial policies using the method of difference would require, he explained, finding two nations—one rich and one poor—"which agreed in everything except their commercial policy," while the method of agreement would require that the nations "agree in no circumstance whatever, except in having a restrictive system and in being prosperous" (Mill [1843]1988, 68, 70). Whether we use the method of difference or agreement, we compare one nation with another. If we were to compare a nation perspectivally, in contrast, we would need to compare it to something we deem to belong to a different category. We might thus perspectivally compare a nation to a family, human body, or melting pot.

Why Perspectival Comparison in the Social Sciences Warrants more Attention

Working out how to best compare juxtapositionally is a worthy project because juxtapositional comparison is so common across the social sciences. Yet we must acknowledge that social scientists routinely compare perspectivally as well. Game theorists conceive of politics or economics as games with rules and predictable outcomes. Process tracers think of society as a kind of machine in which various sorts of causal mechanisms are at work. Interpretivists—or at least some of them—see culture as a web that suspends people in meanings they have spun, to paraphrase Clifford Geertz (1973, 5). Sometimes such analogies are self-consciously crafted and invoked. More often they are implicit and taken for granted and thus go unnoticed. Consequently, perspectival comparison has been the subject of far less methodological reflection in the social-science literature on comparing than its juxtapositional cousin.

There are at least four reasons why perspectival comparison deserves more time in the spotlight. For one, it often serves as the foundation for juxtapositional comparison. To juxtapositionally compare, say, the causal mechanisms that produced both the French and Russian revolutions requires first conceiving of a revolution as an ordered sequence of events produced by processes that are analogous to the operation of parts in a machine. If our thought is not to be guided in unexamined ways, we need to be more attentive to how the perspectival comparisons that we make shape the way we understand the phenomenon in question, frame the way we conceptualize what is going on, and guide our choices about those facets of social reality to compare juxtapositionally. One reason why social scientists sometimes fail to notice the perspectival comparisons which lie beneath their inquiries is that such comparisons are in many instances already embedded in the ordinary language that they draw upon to conceptualize their studies. A perspectival comparison can seem so obvious and natural that it is not even recognized as a perspectival comparison. Notice, for instance, how I slipped in a perspectival comparison three sentences above by likening social reality to a cut gem. Like the multiple polished faces of a diamond, social reality too may be thought of as having facets—an idea that has become so commonplace that it is rarely even noticed as metaphoric.

The second, related, reason why perspectival comparison deserves more time in the limelight is that any similarities generated by means of it are only partial. Politics is like carpentry in some ways *but not others*. A nation is like a family in some ways *but not others*. Any perspectival comparison channels our attention toward some things and away from others. As Max Black (1962, 41–42) explains:

> Suppose I am set the task of describing a battle in words drawn as largely as possible from the vocabulary of chess. These latter terms determine a system of implications which will proceed to control my description of the battle. The enforced choice of the chess vocabulary will lead some aspects of the battle to be emphasized, others to be neglected.

Perspectival comparisons specify and disregard at the same time. To point out the chessness of battle is to both focus on the move-countermove strategy of battle and take no note of its horror. To point out the carpentryness of politics is to both shed light on the place of passion and perspective in politics and overlook the possibility that politics might not always be a matter of treating people like lumber to be drilled, that it can instead involve people coming together as equals. To borrow the language of Hannah Arendt (1958, 220–30), we might conceive of politics in terms of "action" rather than "making." Social scientists who rely on a given perspectival comparison need to be aware of where that comparison directs attention and what it removes from view if they are not to let the comparison channel their thought in ways that are both unrecognized and unduly constraining. By recognizing the place of perspectival comparison in our thinking, we become more aware of the ways in which particular perspectival comparisons potentially box in our thinking. Such an awareness can open space for more expansive understandings and make us more alive to surprises that have the power to disrupt our commonsense.

The third reason why perspectival comparison merits attention: it is a powerful tool for making sense of ourselves, our experiences, and our world. To characterize what love "really is," we might compare it to a delicate dance or smoldering fire or wild rollercoaster ride or even hand-to-hand combat. Indeed, our understanding of love takes shape, in part, by means of the multiple perspectival comparisons that we make, by viewing love from not one, but many vantage points. As Burke put it more abstractly, "It is by the approach through a variety of perspectives that we establish a character's reality" (1941, 422).[3] If we want to establish what kind of thing, say, modern democracy is, we might perspectivally compare it to a game (see, e.g., Bobbio 1987), a market (see, e.g., Downs 1957), a family drama (see, e.g., Lakoff 2002), and a theater production (see, e.g., Edelman 1988), among other things. It is by viewing modern democracy from multiple vantage points that we build up a textured understanding of what it is.

We come, finally, to the fourth reason. If perspectival comparison establishes reality, then making a fresh perspectival comparison can establish a different reality, can inaugurate new ways to understand the world. When Thomas Hobbes ([1651]1998, 7) persuaded readers of *Leviathan* to view the state as an "artificial man," he changed their conception of it. They came to view the state as both human and a work of artifice, as something that could be engineered by means of social contract. When Paul Samuelson convinced readers of *Foundations of Economic Analysis* to conceive of economics in terms of thermodynamics, they came to see the operation of physical laws, such as Le Chatelier's Principle, at work in the market (1947, 36). Samuelson's imaginative use of analogy, not incidentally, helped secure his place as the "father of modern economics," to quote one historian (Parker 2002, 25). It is a curious fact that while many scholars celebrate analogical reasoning for its contributions to creative scientific thinking (see, e.g., Brown 1976), few recognize it as a distinctively comparative approach or conceptualize it as such.

Methodological Questions about Perspectival Comparison

Recognizing perspectival comparison as a distinct and pervasive mode of comparative analysis within the social sciences raises a host of methodological questions. Here I offer initial thoughts on just two.

The Question of Procedure

The first methodological question I wish to take up has to do with procedure: How can we generate fresh perspectival comparisons? Where do they come from? Acknowledging that comparisons are made, not found, that similarities are created, not encountered, means that there is no instrument, no machine capable of unearthing a perspectival comparison as if some already existing similarity were buried in the ground just waiting to be dug up. It would perhaps be more fruitful to ask instead how we might cultivate habits of thought to render moments of imaginative comparison-making more rather than less likely to occur. As C. Wright Mills put it, a certain "playfulness of mind" is surely necessary because, like the sociological imagination that he was describing, perspectival comparison has an "unexpected quality…perhaps because its essence is the combination of ideas that no one expected were combinable" (1959, 211). Such playfulness requires exercising those parts of the brain where the sparks of imagination ignite—trying one's hand at writing poetry, for instance. It also requires nourishing one's thinking with a rich and varied diet. To see the carpentryness of politics, the chessness of battle, or the grandmotherness of toads, after all, requires knowing something about both carpentry and politics, chess and battle, grandmothers and toads. Put another way, intellectual nourishment requires gardening outside the walls of the academy and reading omnivorously beyond the confines of one's discipline.

The Question of Truth

The second, thornier methodological question has to do with judgments about truth: Are any perspectival comparisons "true," or at least, "better" than others? How one answers this question depends in good part on how one understands the relationship of language to the social world. If one believes that the social world exists independent of language, then perspectival comparisons might be conceived of as models or hypotheses about that independently existing social world which can be tested (see, e.g., Landau 1961, 334–35). Statements like "Politics is carpentry" or "Society functions like a machine" become propositions that can be verified or falsified through observation of a world taken to be freestanding.

But such a view of how language relates to the social world is, I believe, mistaken. Our social world is built up by the words we use. Battles, politics, nations, and grandmothers do not stand apart from the language we use to engage, create, or relate to them. As Charles Taylor puts it, language is "constitutive" of the social world (1971, 25). This claim should not be taken as a naive argument for linguistic determinism. Taylor clarifies:

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[3] Note that Burke has an expansive understanding of "character." He defines it as "whatever can be thought of as distinct (any thing, pattern, situation, structure, nature, person, object, act, rôle, process, event, etc.)" (1941, 422).

> The situation we have here is one in which the vocabulary of a given social dimension is grounded in the shape of social practice in this dimension; that is, the vocabulary wouldn't make sense, couldn't be applied sensibly, where this range of practices didn't prevail. And yet this range of practices couldn't exist without the prevalence of this or some related vocabulary. There is no simple one-way dependence here. We can speak of mutual dependence if we like, but really what this points up is the artificiality of the distinction between social reality and the language of description of that social reality. The language is constitutive of the reality, is essential to its being the kind of reality it is (1971, 24).

Words and the world, in short, are inseparably dependent upon each other.

If the words we use are constitutive of the world, and if we make comparisons, not find them, then there is no freestanding world "out there" against which to test statements like "Politics is carpentry" or "Society functions like a machine." Indeed, it is by means of such perspectival comparisons that we build up our understanding of what that world is. Here we would also do well to remember that the world is multivalent. We can think of democracy in terms of a game, a market, a family drama, a theater production, *and many other things besides*. We are not locked into a single metaphoric scheme (Lakoff 1987, 304–37). Given this metaphoric polysemy, given the multiple ways that we have of conceiving the world, how should we think about truth? Philip Wheelwright (1962, 172–73) offers what I take to be sage advice:

> The best we can hope to do is catch partisan glimpses, reasonably diversified, all of them imperfect, but some more suited to one occasion and need, others to another….The metaphoric and the mythic are needed elements in the intellectual life of an individual and of a community; only, when serious questioning begins, one must deal with the proposed answers not by outright acceptance or rejection but with limited and qualified consideration, murmuring with the Hindu gurus of the Upanishads, "*neti neti*"–"not quite that, not quite that!"

The "goodness" of a particular perspectival comparison depends on the occasion and the need, and even so, it can offer only a glimpse of something which is not entirely that. To sharpen Wheelwright's point, we might add that a good perspectival comparison within the social sciences—with its particular occasions and needs—might be one that, among other things, is fresh enough to generate genuinely new insight about what the social world is or what takes place within it; while a good social-science use of perspectival comparison is one which acknowledges that any one comparison, however original and profound, still only offers a single vantage point among many.

Concluding thoughts

Perspectival comparison is foundational to the social sciences. Acknowledging its central role should both expand and complicate our understanding of the ways in which we compare and the constitutive role played by language when we compare. Much of the interesting work begins once we realize that reality is not given and overt but—to again quote Wheelwright—"latent, subtle, and shy" (1962, 173). Put more prosaically, our reality is often metaphorically constructed, typically in ways that we fail to notice, by means of perspectival comparison. It is time to move this more hidden mode of comparison out of the shadows.

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