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Introduction

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Introduction

Not to find one's way around a city does not mean much. But to lose one's way in a city, as one loses one's way in a forest, requires some schooling. Street names must speak to the urban wanderer like the snapping of dry twigs, and little streets in the heart of the city must reflect the times of day, for him, as clearly as a mountain valley. This art I acquired rather late in life; it fulfilled a dream, of which the first traces were labyrinths on the blotting papers in my school notebooks. Walter Benjamin, *Berlin Childhood around 1900* (Benjamin, 2002, p. 352)

Louis Wirth used to give a very critical talk about everything that was wrong with survey research. Fieldwork was the only qualitative option at Chicago. That was not a problem for me because I'm an immigrant, and *almost every immigrant starts to do fieldwork the moment he or she arrives on these shores* (italics added). Herbert Gans (in Jaynes *et al.*, 2009, p. 379)

We are nothing more than dead goats here. Mohammed (migrant from Côte D'Ivoire, in Naples)

1. Comparison as method and everyday practice

The three passages above offer entries into the question of comparison in ethnography that occupies the papers in this Special Issue. We will return later to the substance of the quotes, but first, it is no coincidence that these passages come from the general fields of migration and urban life. Both fields force both ethnographers and lay people to confront explicitly social and cultural difference across space and time, and how differences coalesce into more or less defined «groups». Both fields expose the fiction of easily delimited sites for comparison because of the density and scale of relations in cities and in migration trajectories. As such, these fields destabilize presumed categories and simplistic classi-

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fications – for the ethnographer's everyday engagement in these fields starkly juxtaposes forms and experiences from different social orders that force the social scientist to consider contrasts and similarities.

But, as anticipated, social scientists are not the only one to face similar problems. Mohammed, quoted above, is a migrant from Côte d'Ivoire who has lived off and on in Naples, Italy since 2002, first harvesting vegetables in Campania but then also working with various non-profits (ONLUS) and Italian unions to advocate for migrant rights. His use of analogy in the epigraph above not only asserts a correspondence or partial similarity, it is politically charged and in a profoundly suggestive way as it compares a category of people – in this case, sub-Saharan African migrants in Italy – to a category of animals, namely goats. As an analogy, it is bursting with relevant socio-political commentary on the place of migrants in Italy – racism, social inequality, lack of agency, dehumanization, and powerlessness. In further conversation, Mohammed was well aware of Satyrs and Fauns in Greek and Roman mythology, but chuckled when asked if that meant migrants were also to be feared as Satyrs were for their sexual prowess and ribaldry. His response was: «Maybe, I hadn't meant that, no, we are just treated as helpless animals only good for work and slaughter – but now that you mention it, sure». The rest of the journey he joked playfully with his friends about the implications of migrants as Satyrs. A classical form of comparison that appears virtually everywhere – the juxtaposition of humans and the other animals – may thus encapsulate quite diverging meanings. The first comparison was only a starting point, provisional, open to additional unexpected analogies, as the conversation between the ethnographer and Mohammed foregrounded other possible dimensions entailed by the original comparison which, while not initially intended, soon allowed Mohammed to look at his own situation under a new light.

For the ethnographic observer, everyday encounters entail thinking through analogies, metaphors, images, relations, resonances, traces – and how these are reconfigured in interaction. These fields inescapably challenge ethnographers to address the world-changing interconnections of our contemporary political economy, since urban forms and population movements are so intimately tied to the movement of capital and its evolving socio-political forms. The 1990s master narrative, with its emphasis on the «liquefying» of the social, once appeared to relegate comparative exercises to the past, in a world now allegedly fully «globalized». However, the continuing importance of territories, boundaries, and locales has since become apparent. Contemporary history has indeed shown a multiplication of territories, sceneries and situations which, although connected, are also remarkably different, and even fragmented. So, the current historical context is one that is better explored by attending to borders (Mezzadra, Neilson, 2013), frictions (Tsing, 2015) and splinters (Marvin, Graham, 2001).

The current post-Global Financial Crisis retro-neo-liberalism that dominates politico-economies, coupled with neo-nationalisms, petro-states capitalism, aggressive Chinese state capitalism, surveillance, universalizing ideologies, and applications of big data, measures and audit regimes of governance help

constitute these fields, and thus necessarily inform any ethnographic thinking and practice. Cities are subject to, for example, transnational capital's influence on real estate markets, transport economies, infrastructures, trade dynamics, debt and the movement of migrants in and out of places. Despite populist discontent, these practices and ideologies continue to inform state policies, para-state actors and corporations through management consultants and the colonization of institutions by business models around the globe. It is perhaps this imagined increased global integration that creates a sense of urgency in ethnography to compare as well as despair about the seemingly universalizing, undifferentiating power of global capital and its associated political formations.

2. Between particularism and comparatism

As remarked by Joel Robbins in his commentary included in this Special Issue, the tension between particularism and comparatism is one of the constitutive tensions that defines the social sciences. This means that in any sort of sociological analysis, including value analysis (as proposed by Robbins), one cannot but «walk the tightrope» between the two poles. Interestingly, even the rise of new methods and approaches since the 1990s, such as for instance «multi-sited ethnography», has perhaps illustrated precisely the need to find new ways and new alternatives between classical localism and impossible globalism in ethnographic work[1]. From this perspective, ethnography's strength lies in its intimate, on-the-ground observation, interpretation and analysis of complex social realities at the junction of large-scale historical trends and improvisational, contingent aspects of people's agency in the everyday. This experiential mode of constituting knowledge, lays bare the intersubjective process of how we and others come to know the world, challenging assumptions about a seamless universalizing process. It also encourages what Strathern (1990) has characterized as «strategies of negation», i.e. the inversion and subversion of concepts the ethnographer brings to and encounters in the field.

So, how to understand comparison today? In ethnography, as well as more generally in the humanities and social sciences, the issue has been debated for over century of history now. While different conceptual and methodological debates have altered the particular instantiations of how comparison has been addressed, several questions continue to animate concerns about it. Most significantly, a seemingly unresolvable tension persists between how local know-

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[1] Authors such as George Marcus (1995) and Ulf Hannerz (2003) clearly made the point that multi-site ethnography entails the construction of a *translocal* field, analysing places in light of their linkages: «These linkages – Hannerz (2003, p. 206) writes – make the multi-site study something different from a mere comparative study of localities (which in one classical mode of anthropological comparison was based precisely on the assumption that such linkages did not exist)». That said, following a single tranlocal phenomenon will again expose the ethnographers to the variations, transformations and diversities taken up by the phenomenon in different locales. This insight is central, for instance, in Anna Tsing's work. In this Special Issue, an example of this predicament is offered by Chiara Brocco's paper, where the same social and religious institutions are modified and adapted to different contexts of migration.

ledge and practice can be scaled up to universal and generalized claims – the old tension between universalism and particularism. The challenges of comparison are then not only pragmatic, but deeply epistemological, raising questions such as: How do we search for shared processes and social relations across different sites? How are tendencies or recurrences reflecting global processes constituted through local forms, relations and dynamics? In a relational world, is not the process of comparison a fundamental means by which we practically *build* our community of knowing, apprehending our shared uncertainties? How do processes of negation and inversion of relationships between and within sites inform the way we build knowledge about migration and city life? And so on. Yet, arguably there are other, perhaps even more pragmatically pressing concerns – including for instance the usefulness of classifications across different cultures and social groupings. Given the profoundly localized and contextualized nature of the ethnographic encounter, scholar using comparison must either acknowledge or wish away the implicit or explicit ranking of peoples and cultural units on a putative hierarchical scale of alleged evolutionary progress.

Informed by postcolonial and post-structural perspectives, critical assessments of positivistic forms of comparison have emphasized how the practice of comparison, once ingrained in an evolutionist narrative, becomes part of a long history of inequality with wide-ranging implications (Asad, 1973). For instance, racialized comparative rankings of people in colonies and more remote or rural regions from cities within European countries in the 19th and early 20th century explicitly expressed developmental hierarchies of culture. If less overt, the language of modernity, modernization and more recently, the business and management frames of «best practices» and «good governance», serve as putative universal key terms that in fact provide comparative scaling of peoples, places and cultures across everything from human rights to democracy, from environmental practices to the league tables of Universities.

It may seem too reductive to assert that comparison is a fundamental cognitive process for ethnographers who style themselves as researchers engaged in the world «out there» (Strauss, Quinn, 1987); yet, that fundamental human way of knowing, when extended to signify the intersubjective and mutual construction of knowledge, also serves as an implicit ethical core for many ethnographers as they assert the value of knowledge constituted by ethnographic practice to the other academic disciplines, University administrators, and wider publics. In this frame, it may be problematic to define comparison as a rigid sequence of steps: since ethnography is intersubjective and contextualized, the way comparison is actually conducted is constantly reinvented with substantial methodological creativity and improvisation in the field and at the desk, well before the work is published, circulated and interpreted.

More interestingly, as hinted above comparison is not only a scientific method: as we are reminded by Mohammed, in the first place, it is an everyday social practice. People do compare. All comparison is driven by an interest – broadly speaking, by an «ideology». As suggested for instance by Nick Dines in his commentary included in this Special Issue, comparison is thus strongly performative. Comparisons do not simply describe existing differences and sim-

ilarities, they actually drive attention and interest, actively shaping our understanding of the terms that come to be compared. In the case of comparisons between cities, for instance, Dines suggests the existence of veritable «cultures of urban comparison». It is certainly not innocent, and not without consequences, to advance a comparison between Naples and Stockholm on the one hand, and Naples and Lagos on the other. Not simply the meaning of a specific single comparison, but the meaning of the *act of comparing* itself can only be understood in situated contexts, with references to specific actors involved in situated interaction, within existing imaginative and representational frames. Consequently, the selection of entities brought into a given comparison is always a sensitive issue – ultimately, it is a deeply political one.

Another striking example is provided by the current practices of evaluation. In the opening contribution of this Special Issue, Michael Herzfeld highlights how evaluation is an ubiquitous human practice, but adds that it is has gone awry in the world-changing neoliberal economy, now producing knowledge through measures, metrics, indices, audits, and so on. Auditing in particular incorporates the tendency towards an ever expanding domain of commensurability to the detriment of uniqueness. Its presupposition of universal «translatability» has wide-ranging consequences, apparently in the direction of flattening out all nuances of local exceptionality. But paradoxically, Herzfeld suggests, it is precisely «translation [that] throws nuance into sharp relief» – suffice to pause for an instant on any of the terms supposed to be working as *equivalent* to discover huge gaps and complicated geometries of assumption. In Herzfeld's analysis, the rise of auditing has been functional to «streamlining of the concept of value as single-stranded, enumerable, and, above all, economic» – yet, social practices that resist such reductionism are already around, and, Herzfeld suggests, we may learn something from them.

During the 1980s, an explicit retreat from formal comparisons was advocated in anthropology. At that time, ethnographers started to put more emphasis on how inequality was implicit in the practices of representation. These critiques focused on how representational practices reinforced existing forms of power, expressed through temporal framing, moral distinctions and hierarchies of value. Critiquing these representational practices became a central preoccupation, and form of collective introspection (Clifford, Marcus, 1986; Abu-Lughod, 1991). Even so, a decade later Herzfeld (2001) quite forcefully argued that fieldwork, reflection and writing – the sacred trinity of ethnography – necessarily always already entail comparison. In other words, comparison remains central to the reflexivity involved in fieldwork, as the ethnographer experientially engages with translation of languages, social situations, emotions, conducts, and meanings.

Comparison thus seems to essentially occur both «frontally» – whereby an ethnographic «other» is contrasted with «our» ways of seeing, doing or thinking – and «laterally» – whereby its utility comes from placing instances of a practice, element or idea from different socio-cultural contexts side by side (Candea, 2019). But, they are two different processes. In the «frontal» one, the comparison is among the categories of those being studied and those of the ethnographer;

in the «lateral» one, it is between the categories of two different groups of those under study: a comparison that can be made only by the ethnographer (or by the insider *as* an ethnographer). They also have different consequences: an error of the ethnographer in the frontal process leads to a miscomprehension of the social interaction; an error in the lateral process to a rebuke by the professional community of ethnographers, to whom the ethnographer addresses research. Bottalico's paper in this Special Issue offers, for instance, a lateral comparison, putting side-by-side labour dynamics at port infrastructures in the harbor cities of Antwerp and Genoa. Despite their commonalities in an integrated global infrastructure of containerization and larger EU institutional frame, Bottalico shows that local labor and migrant dynamics in fact continue to produce varied labour regimes. It is not just simply how we ethically confront and negotiate comparison that matters, but how comparison is, in a sense, *constitutive of our attitude*. If people use analogies to make sense of their world across domains within a cultural horizon, then culture itself can be said to be comparative, while ethnographic knowledge must be built upon multiple intra-cultural as well as inter-cultural processes of comparison (Strathern, 1992; Wagner, 1981; Detienne, 2008). And the limits between the intra and the inter are, of course, hard to define. The complicated challenge for ethnographers is figuring out how to avoid turning «ours» and «theirs» into essences, equivocating with our «uncontrolled» translations, yet remain capable to observe resonances and trace recurrences in the experiential field (Viveiros de Castro, 2004).

3. The revival of comparison in the social science

As suggested above, several decades of postcolonial and post-structural critique now inform ethnographic practice and analysis, and this «internal» critique of how ethnographers represent their research has become deeply ingrained in our research practice. As Bourdieu once remarked, reflexivity cannot be confined to a «personal» attitude – with each researcher reflecting on his/her own positioning in the world – but must also turn «disciplinary» – with an inquiry into the blind spots and the over-determinations of our disciplines in the larger context of power structures and the political economy (Bourdieu, Wacquant, 1992). Theoretically and methodologically, Bourdieu envisaged an immediate connection between the individual and the universal: «The challenge – he contended – is systematically to interrogate the particular case by constituting it as a 'particular instance of the possible', as Bachelard (1949) put it, in order to extract general or invariant properties that can be uncovered only by such interrogation» (Bourdieu, Wacquant, 1992, p. 233).

The complexity lies in the fact that comparison works not so much along this universal-individual line, but, so to speak, slantwise, across a multiplicity of situations that have not yet been fully theorized or encoded. Even in the absence of a fully satisfying social theory of the contemporary world, awareness of the triumphalist language of globalization across the political, economic and cultural spheres, marching hand-in-hand with increasing inequalities, job precarity, and ecological degradation have contributed to a renewed interest in comparison as

an urgently needed mode to make sense of the emerging conditions that face our globe. Such a shift signals, we believe, the rise of critical awareness about an assumed universal process as opposed to particular, sited and localized realities (Gingrich, Fox, 2002; Gingrich, 2012; Candea, 2019).

The everyday might be the site where these tensions come to the fore. Not by chance then, the perspective of everyday life is currently being reclaimed by a number of scholars working on a variety of issues revolving around cities and migration. The commentaries included in this Special Issue are particularly telling in this respect. For instance, Ilaria Giglioli compares the coexistence of Tunisians and Sicilians in early 20th century Tunisia's colonial context, and in contemporary immigration debates. Interestingly, the central assumption in the latter public debate – namely, that Europeans and Northern Africans are cultur- ally different and ways to coexist must be found – is revealed by Giglioli as pre- cisely the outcome of a deliberate strategy to keep the two populations separate in the early-20th century colonial context. This suggests that even when – as almost always – the two cases are not symmetric nor structurally homologous (so that, as Da Col [2015] puts it, the regularities are «incomplete», or, with Viveiros de Castro [2004], «equivocal»), each case can helpfully cast new light on the nature of the other. In her case, specifically, Giglioli suggests that the «units» that enter comparison cannot be regarded as closed: on the contrary, they «are strongly connected to processes that extend well beyond their bound- aries». Such connections are, in fact, constitutive. The critical potential of the comparatist perspective – Giglioli argues – can thus lie in its de-naturalizing potential: «Comparative ethnographies of bordering may give us the tools to denaturalize and defamiliarize borders».

As a further step, Japonica Brown-Saracino shows in her commentary that even a certain «analytic flexibility of the comparative-ethnographic design» cannot substitute for «our willingness to let data take us in new and unexpected directions». Only the latter, Brown-Saracino submits, can help transform the comparative approach and the practice of comparison into an actual advance- ment of sociological explanation – so that «the same basic research design that facilitated the identification of patterns here facilitated the development of a theoretical account for heterogeneity» across various sites of investigation. In other words, it was precisely through the emergence of counter-intuitive, cross- category phenomena that the author could realize the site-specific quality of «sexual identity cultures» at city and perhaps even at neighborhood level.

In anthropology, the revival of comparison has accompanied, and perhaps flanked, an enhanced attention towards the issues of ethics, ontology and multis- pecies research. Drawing from the classic anthropological work by Wolf and Cole on the German and Roman settlement models, in their commentary Almut Schneider and Elisabeth Tauber report from their current research project on mountain farming and relations to the land in the Alps along the Italian-Austri- an border. They argue that, in their context, comparison must be articulated in ways that also include multi-species encounters and non-human assemblages. Concretely, they wonder «whether farmers in the Ötztal Alps of the 17th century perceived glaciers as actors when sending one hundred white-clad virgins up

the glaciers to stop the ice from growing, thereby covering the mountain pastures». As the example makes clear, one does not know what counts as relation to the land before learning, historically and ethnographically, from a number of situations.

The search for renewed, more optimistic engagements with comparison seems to be on its way, potentially overcoming, as da Col (2015) writes, «the anti-essentialist obsessions of deconstruction, poststructuralism, and postcolonialism». In this sense, Robbins' analysis (2013; and below in this SI) on «the good» as a potentially useful axiological notion to compare desirable goals across cultures offers another recent re-engagement with comparison. Ironically, this renewed confidence and experimentation by ethnographers occurs just as ethnography's value of intimate knowledge and an intensive form of engagement with people, places, issues and actions gets picked up, mostly in name and not method, by more popular media and business gurus who now offer more opportunistic and economically-driven ways to apprehend the rapidly globalizing world (see, for instance, the app indeemo, https://indeemo.com/; Venkatesh *et al.*, 2015).

Appadurai (1986) first noted that there is a tendency for places to become connected to specific research questions and representative of particular issues. This can lead to analysis in those sites that is predefined, restricted and narrowed, that is, prone to distortions. The same problem is faced by Giacomo Orsini in his commentary below: how to react to a situation where a place comes to embody one single phenomenon, to the detriment of all others? In fact, certain European borderland hotspots, such as Melilla, Lampedusa, Idomeni and Lesbos, have currently come to be identified pure and simply with the refugee and migration crisis that has been challenging Europe for more than a decade. Orsini highlights how more nuanced ethnographic pictures of local interactions with migrants were erased by the dominant interpretive lens: not simply journalists, but «[s]cholars [too] have frequently developed their analysis as if the border was established in a sociocultural vacuum», overlooking the peculiar nature of places and their complex territorial dynamics, not necessarily related to the phenomena most visible in the media sphere. Selected keywords, conceptual terms or ways of framing that emerge out of migration, urban studies, or more simply placed-based situated ethnography, become metonyms for the studied sites themselves, and erase or discourage other forms of inquiry. Migration researchers constantly confront the question of the relevant categories for comparison. What do, for instance, the categories Eritrean migrant, or Ivorian migrant, South American migrants, or South Asian migrants do? These deceivingly simple categories that guide the Census and state categories of recognition may be studied implicitly or explicitly in comparison with religious categories, such as Catholics, Protestants; Muslim or Hindus or Sikhs. In each case, the comparative perspective implies a different query, scale or domain. The subject «migrant» itself pre-determines the admissible queries, placing the subject outside the frame of the host nation-state.

This problem feeds back into the naturally-comparativist nature of humans, whereby the same move that institutes a certain comparison (for instance, in the

case of Nick Dines' commentary, «Naples as Lagos») simultaneously institutes an essence of the comparable terms (what is Lagos in the first place, and which characteristics of it resonate with Naples). Here, we see that instituting comparison visualises a situation which we could call *contagious*, whereby the features of one term flood into the other. Once evoked, the diacritics of one term can no longer be easily disentangled from those of the other. If so, social scientists could even consider analyzing everyday comparison in the light of the of laws of magic laid out by classical anthropologists such as, most famously, James Frazer. Different scales and domains can be intersected with some leading motif or preoccupation to elaborate comparative exercises: for instance, in this Special Issue Bonfanti, Massa and Miranda explore the concept of «home» as a marker of belonging across different cities and category groups of migrants. Their team ethnography is also inherently comparative, in the sense that each researcher is embedded in her/his own subjective and inter-subjective approach.[2] The authors seek to ground the abstraction of «home» through an approach to the sensorium involved in the everyday activities of cooking, which become powerful prompts for memory, aspiration, and the narration of their tensions and mismatches. Such an approach reveals the productivity of thinking through the universal and the particular both in the field and across research design.

4. Comparison as entanglement

The olfactory system is believed to be significantly entwined with memory, which leads us to Benjamin's epigraph. The entanglement of cities and migration offers ample space for comparative inquiry. Benjamin opens up the provisional, the temporal and the spatial domains, indicating the multiple perspectives, the traces of memories and histories one must account for in order to probe the city. These recurrences across space and time, achieve an almost infinite number of directions and pathways of partial connections when implicated by migration patterns. Benjamin himself wrote in exile, largely in misery, and deliberately picked a topic – his own childhood – which was both most cherished and most painful to evoke. Some of the suggestive aspects of Benjamin's work on cities are the partial readings one engages with in movements through streets, neighborhoods and train stations, navigated in the present but with traces and memories of other times and places. For him, the cities of Marseille, Berlin, Naples or Paris can be read through the meditation by the other, to open up novel and extended ways of engaging with the experience of dwelling in urban space. The same social form, the same institution can be deeply affected by migration and by new urban conditions. So in this issue, for example, Brocco traces the institution of «tutorat», a form of inter-personal mentoring and hospitality, to reveal temporal and spatial recurrences for Ivorian migrants across sites such

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[2] Interestingly, team ethnography seems to be mostly practiced by, or associated with, fields and disciplines having to do with labour and organization studies, which are taking an increasingly global approach due to the very logic of capital extraction and production. See for instance, in organization studies, Jarzabkowski *et al.* (2014).

as Paris, Naples and Côte d'Ivoire, revealing the disjunctures and continuities in their memories and practices. Yet, even such a subjective feel for the city cannot be thoroughly freed from the formal objective maps and plans that seek to structure imagination in the streets. The city as a labyrinth requires the constant tracking back and forth between analogies of form and content, subjective and objective, types of people and types of spaces imbricated with resonances of social categories that allow the walker to navigate unfamiliar streets, the vast public domain of the city.

The layering of memory, the feel for a place, or just the struggle to navigate the streets constantly structure a migrant's encounter with the urban form. Migrants constantly compare urban forms and sensations across time and space: just as migrants and refugees, all minority and marginal subjects are «comparers» by necessity and by virtue. The last opening quote from Herbert Gans, the renowned urban sociologist commenting on his student days at the University of Chicago, fittingly and usefully disrupts the distinction between inside and outside, researcher and informant, working and living, cutting across all these domains of knowledge and action. A German immigrant background necessarily made for Gans the everyday of living in the United States and being a student in Chicago a reflexive process of comparison. His testimony is thus an apt reminder to all ethnographers, echoing Benjamin's walker in the city, of our own entanglement in the world. In the swirl of cities and movements we routinely compare sites, neighborhoods, practices, narratives, cultural idioms, across places. With the complex interconnectedness-cum-disconnectedness of the globe, the resonating traces of diffusion or different origins that structure the similarities and differences, comparison in its multiplicity proves a continuing challenge for ethnography.

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