



Peter van der Veer, *The Value of Comparison*

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THE VALUE OF COMPARISON is an expanded version of a lecture Peter van der Veer gave as part of the Lewis Henry Morgan Lecture Series in 2013. It is a “reminder of the ethical responsibility of all those who study the human condition to subject their own categories and practices to continuous critique” (ix). Van der Veer presents an argument for the value of the comparative project in anthropology and historical sociology. He asserts that the comparative approach ought to be revitalized as a counterpoint to the “growing generalism in sociology and the expanding influence of cognitive universalism in the social sciences” (147).

While its theoretical depth and breadth covers the history of the comparative method, it is a highly accessible book that specialists and non-specialists alike will find thought provoking and engaging. The formatting makes for easier reading, as the unobtrusive endnotes do not distract. Van der Veer explores the current state of anthropological thought through a critique of what he describes as the “misplaced quest for generality” (vii). The main purpose of the book is stated as providing “an anthropological lens on historical material” (2). Van der Veer makes it clear that his project is to overcome the essentializing, ethnocentric narratives that arise through the assumptions of civilizational unity (7) by means of comparative description (3).

The book is divided into three sections: “The Fragment and the Whole,” “Civilization and Comparison,” and “Comparing Exclusion.” Over six chapters, van der Veer argues for a comparative approach, which he asserts is anthropology’s “starting point” (27), that can connect contemporary and past societies through connecting anthropology and history (2). Each section has two chapters, which provide valuable essays on rational choice theory, iconoclasm, urban poverty, sanitation, social exclusion, and the marginalization of mountain people.

The first chapter provides an argument for the comparative advantage of anthropology. It builds on Geertz’s thick description, arguing that comparative, conceptual engagement with a fragment can allow for complex reflection of the underlying structures of our own and other societies (28). Van der Veer argues that the comparative approach is necessary to understand the common characteristics of shared, intimate, globalized spaces, where different worldviews and practices sometimes clash, and at other times, provide glimpses of hope for humanity’s future, that enable penetrating insight through the opaqueness of totalizing attitudes founded upon “holistic” “ways of life,” and a civilizational ethos that elides the “fragmented and contradictory realities people inhabit” (7). Anthropology, van der Veer asserts, can go deeper through a comparative understanding of social inequality, which might lead to social transformation (33). In the comparative project, van der Veer highlights the difference between caste and race, explaining that the former is an example of a hierarchical ideology, while the latter is an example of an egalitarian ideology (36). However, he argues that similar does not mean same (37).

The second chapter critiques economic models, exposing an explanatory weakness for their role in the sociology of religion (48). He focuses on Rational Choice Theory, and suggests that it is not a convincing explanatory model for the Indian religious market. Instead, in a post-Weberian push, the binary assumptions between rational/irrational expose all the more the assumptions of modernizing elites. While reliance upon such models might lead to static conceptualizations of the market and the state, they are in fact complex, dynamic, and culturally situated metaphysical entities (54).

The third chapter focuses on the othering process specific to keeping Muslims out of public and national spaces and discourses (79). It does this through comparing the concepts of civilization, civility, and civil society in India, China, and Western Europe. The biggest socio-cultural question posed in this chapter, and possibly in the whole book, is how to live amicably with all this diversity around us. Taylor's "secular age" is critiqued within the context of the axial age dyad of immanence and transcendence. Through comparison of the secular idea, we learn that it is a Western imposition, particularly on India, where it has a different meaning (65). However, the political cosmologies of China, India, and Western Europe balance on a set of ideals for cultural or national unification by othering Muslims and keeping them out.

The fourth chapter explores the afterlife of images, iconicity, and iconoclasm. Iconoclasm is regarded as the sovereign power of the state to arbitrarily decide its visible formation, social transformation, and how sacred cosmological space is consciously constructed as expressions of vigorous nationalisms (95). An Indian example is the construction of the Akshardham temple in New Delhi, which provides a physical example of the ideal, glorious present and future for India, where the sacred, political, quotidian, and commercial merge in a visual display of "ancient" spirituality and scientific modernity (101).

The third section compares exclusion. Chapter Five engages with the sociology of knowledge. It focuses on the dynamic relationships between nation-states and their frontier-borders, where ethnic-minorities are quite often found. Van der Veer highlights the relations that people in North-East India and South-West China have with their respective states. Here the historical sociological and anthropological method he promotes produces a startling clarity about complex issues. Moreover, he argues that neglect of historical circumstances combined with static representations of borders and the people that inhabit these regions further exacerbates the tensions between states and their ethnic minorities, which are often mined for tourist initiatives for their exotic and romantic peculiarities.

The final chapter explores the middle class and higher caste indifference to waste management and living conditions of the poor, and how this results in denial of good health and prosperous lives. Importantly, van der Veer argues that this is both a theoretical and a political problem. Like all the chapters in this book, the strength of this analytical approach lies in the ethnographic observations linked with historical comparisons of modernization and development, particularly between China and India.

In the short conclusion we are reminded that the value of the comparative project in anthropology and historical sociology needs to be revitalized to overcome the growing generalization found in the social sciences. Van der Veer urges a turn toward a post-Weberian/Durkheimian attitude, which he argues is better suited to conceptualizing the complex world within which we live by moving our framework beyond the limiting scope of Western modernity.

The value of this approach is that it does not privilege ethnocentrism nor anecdotal essentialisms.

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