

## EDITORIAL

*The process of Civilization depends on transcending Nationality. Everything is tried by more courts, before a larger audience. Comparative methods are applied. Influences which are accidental yield to those which are rational.*

LORD ACTON

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This note of Lord Acton's expresses what many thinking men of his day felt. The idea of comparative study, borrowed from the natural sciences, especially from the much-admired science of anatomy, had brought new enthusiasm to bear on the study of man's life in society. Scholars, it was urged, should co-ordinate their aims in the faith that law, politics, economics, social organization and religion, and the thought that created and arose from all of these, would fall into a limited number of inter-related patterns. These in turn would reveal a broad common path of development through time.

As is well known, a skeptical reaction against these hopes had set in before the turn of the century. It was provoked partly by the carefree attitude towards their evidence that many writers had shown in the handling of comparison. Looking only for similarities in the institutions and the culture of different peoples and different ages they had too often, as even their most superficial critics had been able to show, neglected pertinent dissimilarities. In point of fact, the body of knowledge at their disposal had been insufficient for the testing of any ambitious generalizations. Ethnology had rested on travellers' tales, comparative religion on a few sacred texts, history was certain of little but the political development of the classical world and the European states, and the nature of the latter's economic policies. Considerably more was known of earthworms and other invertebrates than of the social life of human beings. Valid generalization could of necessity advance only slowly and tentatively, with the extension of research.

Today there is a revival of interest in the method of comparison, forced on us by the times. Without relinquishing the sense of nationality, we have acquired a sense of humanity. The notion of being ethnocentric has become a matter for reproach. Even scholarship is not free from reproach on this score, for, as many great names have pointed out, how can those who study only their own country tell what is truly unique about it?

For some people this position is bewildering. The advance of theory and knowledge makes professional life even for the specialist in a restricted corner, increasingly arduous. How can he be master in several fields without losing his integrity as a craftsman? Will not comparative study turn him into a man who

does not genuinely know anything? Confronted by a choice between possible error through insularity, and probable superficiality through spreading his operations, a sound scholar would prefer to stay in his corner.

Fortunately, this dilemma is a false one. Today's advocates of comparative study urge only that specialists in related fields compare notes on specific similar problems more frequently. While no one is against this, it is in most fields left to individual enterprise. Moreover, where it is a professional practice, as is the rigorous rule in anthropology, and as the existence of journals of comparative law, comparative religion and comparative literature attests, comparison relates usually to problems that are of immediate importance only in a single field.

What is advocated now is wider and more public exchange of information and ideas on matters that are of wider concern. For many believe that there is a definite set of problems common to the humanities, to history, and to the various social sciences. The belief is based upon the evident interaction that occurs in every society between cultural tradition, social organization, and new ideas, new aspirations, and new wants. In their character as specialists the art historians, the economists, the students of religion, and a score of other groups, mark out territory of their own that touches on such interaction. They multiply special problems in special languages. But no group has a monopoly of the recurrent problems of interaction, for example, of the problem of how political ideologies or religions spread, or of what may make certain elements of a cultural pattern for long periods resistant to change.

Problems of this order are common domain. They challenge co-operative attack through regular exchange of hypotheses and findings. This goes on, but haltingly. Unless new research is impressive enough to be published in book form, it may readily escape notice outside a single group of specialists. The reason for this neglect is not lack of awareness of the desirability of more interchange, but the fact that in presenting research articles to a specialist audience one may take it for granted that the broader questions at issue are understood. It is necessary to be explicit only in explaining new theoretical points or setting out new evidence. The outsider is baffled. He cannot see the wood for the trees, even though they may form part of the same wood, the same kind of general problem, with which he is himself engaged. In short, there is a real gap in our system of communications.

*Comparative Studies in Society and History* has been founded to bridge this gap, to serve as a forum for comparable work on recurrent types of problem of general interest. The plan has from the outset met with unexpectedly imaginative co-operation. At the time of writing, support comes from seventeen countries and as many different departments of learning.

Our contributors will select whatever approach to comparative study appears most appropriate to their purposes. Some may prefer the approach through the testing or application of theory, which has often been identified with "the

comparative method.” Where theory is precise, and there is a limited body of data of such a character that all of it can be rigorously checked from the point of view of each competing theory, this is undeniably the best plan. Its success in historical linguistics triumphantly proves the point. Very few of the recurrent cultural problems, however, present themselves under these conditions.

At the other extreme is the purely empirical approach. This has the disadvantage of allowing personal idiosyncrasy too much free play. Even economic historians, men trained to value objectivity through statistical measurement, will tend, in describing the same kind of institution, to count and measure different features of it. The results will then be of little or no use for comparative study. When descriptions lack formal measurement, lack of congruence between them is less readily detectible. Yet personal viewpoints in any complex scene differ inevitably. Two soldiers fighting side by side will not see the same battle.

It is probable that many contributors will prefer a third or mixed approach, drawing to some extent on theory as a means of control over empirical observation. But when they are breaking new ground, or when several writers are treating a similar problem, in different contexts, it will be of service to share working hypotheses. The editorial board will then act as a liaison force to aid in framing questions that may be circulated as a common guide. Such questions will never exclude free-ranging individual enquiry. Their aim will be simply to ensure the comparability of contributions.

Editorial bias is limited to two points. It will favor, although not exclusively, points of view that take as full account as possible of historical factors. This preference reflects the wishes not only of historians but also of anthropologists. Melville J. Herskovits has argued forcefully that his colleagues in that field will find the method of comparison more fruitful if they apply it not so much to areas delimited by geography as to “the analysis of cultures *lying within a given historic stream*.”<sup>1</sup> Again, in regard to theoretical models or concepts, or to new points concerning the logic of comparison, the editorial bias is to ask for their demonstration in action, in new discovery, rather than for their display in the abstract.

Our first issue broaches four inter-related problems. The first is that of the role of the intellectually-trained man in society. The second, that of church and state, may help to suggest some of the special problems which may arise in the relations between intellectuals and authority when the intellectuals are religiously oriented. The two papers on this subject were presented at the convention of the American Historical Association in 1953. The third subject, that of the great

<sup>1</sup> Melville J. Herskovits, “On Some Modes of Ethnographic Comparison”, *Bijdragen tot de taal-, Land-, en Volkenkunde*, deel 112 (1956), 1–20. This article refers to a number of recent discussions of comparative method. An earlier discussion worth adding to the list is “The Body Politic”, *The Collected Papers of Frederick William Maitland*, ed. H. A. L. Fisher (Cambridge University Press, 1911), III, pp. 285–303.

pre-modern bureaucratic polities, further widens the historical perspective in which the role of intellectuals may be viewed. It also underlines the immense significance for social organization, of the first emergence of the intellectually-trained man in the role of professional administrator. In the West kingship and feudalism were midwives to this revolutionary change. For this reason it is fitting to make our fourth subject a comparative study of feudalism.

These subjects will be carried further in subsequent issues, with new ones added in such a way that they intersect to form a continuing conference. Review articles on current work of significance for comparative study will be invited. The liveliness and the scope of our contributors' interests reflects one ultimate end of our role as intellectuals, that of enlarging the common understanding of what man can make of his life in society.

It remains only to thank the authors and the sponsoring institutions whose generous support has made the editors' enterprise possible.

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