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## PERFORMING COMPARISONS: ETHNOGRAPHY, GLOBETROTTING, AND THE SPACES OF SOCIAL KNOWLEDGE <sup>1</sup>

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*Two key aspects of social and cultural anthropology are comparison and reflexivity. For a genuinely empirical anthropology, these must be mutually engaged. In exploring various kinds of comparison—from formal intercommunal analyses to comparisons between nation-states, between anthropology and its cultural objects, and between anthropological and other kinds of writing—the anthropologist’s personal trajectory is critically influential on choices made and paths taken. In contemplating my earliest work in Greece, my decision to compare forms of identity in Greece and Italy, and a recent move to the geographically broader framework offered by including Thailand, I have also had to consider the role of differently situated anthropologists (e.g., local as opposed to foreign), points in career trajectory and developing linguistic competences, and shifting epistemological contexts. As a result, over time, I have found the linkage between comparison and reflexivity increasingly central to the empirical understanding of social and cultural phenomena.*

### TOWARD A REFLEXIVE COMPARATIVISM

ANTHROPOLOGISTS CHARACTERISTICALLY ENGAGE in the mutually engaged tasks of comparison, fieldwork, and writing. They do so, however, with varying degrees of relative emphasis. Those who emphasize formal comparison generally insist on a literal reading of “the facts” as a necessary precondition for their analyses; those who emphasize the literary production of ethnography prefer to

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treat factuality as a peculiar form of representation and to focus on the consequences of reflecting on the role of the analyst in creating or constructing it. Reducing these emphases to opposed, monocular visions of the anthropological task occludes that complex and dynamic tension between the national or global and the minutely local that marks off what we do from most other work in the social sciences.<sup>2</sup> Especially now that “‘the local’ nowadays may be better understood as more like a network than a neighborhood” (Kleinman 1999:70),<sup>3</sup> the work of ethnography necessarily becomes at once more, not less, reflexive: in the pursuit of a social intimacy that can generate cultural understanding, ethnographers see themselves in a growing variety of local mirrors.

This necessarily means that ethnography is also increasingly, not decreasingly, comparative in its implications. Indeed, comparison and reflexivity mean little in isolation from each other. In insisting on a dialectical middle ground where they can mutually engage, we can extend the necessary discomfitures of fieldwork to the critical consideration of theory in its own cultural, historical, and political contexts. In that sense, theory itself becomes an ethnographic object, and what informants say about our theories—their recognition of what these theories mean socially and politically, what ideological messages they bear, what motives they announce, and what impacts they presage—must be taken seriously.

Historians can interpret archival materials in presentist terms; they do not argue back, although—as in Carlo Ginzburg’s (1980) microhistories—they may make possible a certain level of intimacy, defined as insight into the private lives of social actors. Those actors, however, are ordinarily removed by mortality from any possibility of arguing back. Anthropologists, by contrast, can find fewer refuges from the insistent criticism of their informants or the descendants of the latter. Informants do not allow the ethnographers the luxury of decontextualizing interpretation even when the latter are so inclined, and even less in these days when they “read what we write” (Brettell 1993). Anthropologists are thus always compelled to a degree of critical comparison beyond the obvious comparisons that they make with “their own” culture in the field (see Okely 1996). Concomitantly, however, they must also attend to their own role in the field—not just to the presuppositions that they bring to their work, but to their informants’ reciprocal observations of their presence and to the potential effects of such observations on interpretation. Consequently, reflexivity, far from being the antithesis of comparativism, is necessarily always-already entailed in the very act of comparison.

Comparison is reflexive insofar as it recognizes that it always proceeds from the experience (Greek *empeiria*) of the fieldworking self. As one begins the daily round of fieldwork, questions inevitably arise from a sense of the difference between this field encounter and either previous research situations or the ethnographer’s own familiar cultural context (which may be no more than a neighborhood or a few years of graduate study away from the “ethnographic subjects”) (see also Kleinman 1999:77). What makes any fact stand out is this sense of contrast. And not infrequently it is the local informants who draw out that sense of contrast, by making the ethnographer self-conscious with their questioning of so

much that the ethnographer takes for granted: Why do you still have no children? Why do you spend so much time writing? Why are you unwilling to eat this food? Why did you wash your clothes in a visible place? As the ethnographer in turn begins to reflect more analytically on the cultural differences thus highlighted, informant and ethnographer alike become signs of both the differences and the contrasts through which they become meaningful to each other.

At the other end of the scale, virtually all anthropological theory is in some sense comparative. Here, however, we must beware of the temptation to mistake theory for generalization and replicability. Grand theoretical laws cease to mean very much at all when they are divorced from the knowledge of those intimate and unpredictable conditions under which the primary data were gathered. Without such local knowledge, and without an accompanying self-awareness on the ethnographer's part, the play of irony and humor wreaks havoc with self-serious theorizing. Joking relationships—which offer a famous example of reductive comparativism (see Radcliffe-Brown 1952)—might well, for example, turn out to represent a defense of cultural privacy, in which the ethnographer's eagerly quivering nose has stimulated local mechanisms of concealment.

Knowledge of human affairs, as Vico (1744) taught, depends on the frail, embodied capacities of human selves. Comparison only works when it is sensitive to its own context of production: it must be reflexively reflexive. This is a more radically middle-ground position than the simple acknowledgment of “observer bias.” Because it is attentive to context, moreover, it avoids the solipsism that characterizes the ideal-typical positivist and postmodernist, caricatures though they may be, of current debates—a solipsism that derives from the ahistoricism of both positions. Thus, for example, generalizers in the tradition of Radcliffe-Brown (1952:1) are not interested in history because they assume that the idiosyncrasies of historical events are not reducible to general laws and so offer nothing of interest to social science theory. They are also reluctant to acknowledge the historical specificity of their own contribution. Those who are uneasy with such scientism, on the other hand, have no difficulty with the idea that the past is important, but they see it as so infinitely refracted through the divisions of modern political life that talking about “the past” becomes extremely problematic. Some arguably postmodern work actually rescues the project of empirical research from the empiricism—the simulation of the empirical—conducted by scientific generalizers. Rabinow's (1977) early foray into reflexivity, for example, brought the ethnographically almost invisible European ex-colonials into view—an extremely important move in the progressive detachment of anthropology from its historical entailment with colonialism, and by any standards a call to *increase* the range of factual data considered relevant to ethnographic description.

To the survey enthusiasts' criticism that ethnography is “mere anecdotalism,” moreover, we may legitimately counter that it is the very triviality of much of its base material—gossip, for example—that makes it persuasive: it is everywhere, it pervades our informants' lives, it is so common as not to be considered worthy of comment, and, as such, it is often not edited for the curious observer because its significance is so easily overlooked or derided. Its ubiquity is the clearest

indication of its importance.

Conversely, however, comparison—which is at least useful as a heuristic approach, whether or not one expects to generate tenable “rules” from it—is implicit in the very notion of treating cultures as texts and of treating our own texts as cultural artifacts. When we are told that ethnographies share certain recognizable features with travel narratives (Pratt 1986), or that they betray underlying folk theories of the imperialists who coined them (e.g., Kuklick 1984), we are comparing different social and cultural contexts of ethnographic production. These are comparisons, not of data reported from the field, but of those data set in their respective contexts of significance for the anthropologists who reported them.

This again means that the anthropologist’s own professional and personal trajectory is far from irrelevant to the analysis and should form either the context of the comparison or even one of its terms.<sup>4</sup> My own experience of becoming an anthropologist is, I suspect, not an unusual one in its broad outlines—although, to be sure, any attempt to recount it here is liable to reproduce a familiar narrative template. My interest in the ethnography of Greece, emerging from an initial passion for archaeology, drew on a growing sense of parallelism between Zionism and Hellenism: being unsure of what being either “British” or “Jewish” meant to others who so labeled me, and recognizing the enormous personal pressures these ideologies could generate for those unwilling to accept being drafted as insiders, I preferred to dissect a nationalism that was safely someone else’s. Both my folklore research (which I initiated in the highly nationalist context of a Greek university program) and my doctoral anthropological fieldwork were comparative in form and intent; both disciplines had long traditions of comparison and reconstruction. My doctoral fieldwork propelled me further in a comparative direction: declared *persona non grata* by the Greek military regime while doing research on Rhodes in 1974, I returned after the restoration of democracy to work somewhere else (Crete) because there did not seem to be any other option after only six months of fieldwork on Rhodes. While I never published the decidedly uneven dissertation that resulted, it became the point of departure for several comparative exercises. Meanwhile, my move from Europe to the U.S. in 1978 provided yet another source of comparative reflection, especially with regard to cultural sensitivities about an “intimidating” and “snobbish” British way of talking.

But with all the advantages that such a relentlessly dislocated perspective might have offered, I was also distinctly averse to the idea of moving my fieldwork horizons outside Greece. I would never know another culture as well as this one, I told myself; I was unlikely to have the depth of carefully acquired language and other skills. No doubt this was true to some extent, but for me, at that time, it probably functioned more as an excuse than as a reason. It was easier to stick to my lathe; and there was plenty to do—thanks, in part, to the confining restrictions of homogenizing national borders and a more or less common language. I wrote about inheritance practices, naming, and political systems. Most of these studies—one of which was published in this journal (Herzfeld 1982) after another journal had rejected it because a “native reader” had said my material was about “just a custom”—grew out of the two-community comparison of my doctoral thesis and

my desire to expand the comparison heuristically within a clearly delimited cultural space shared by the ethnographies that had inspired my interests in the first place (Campbell 1964; du Boulay 1974; Friedl 1962).

In that article, I argued that a comparison of the baptismal naming systems of several rural Greek communities, and especially of the exceptions that local custom tolerated and tried to explain away, could lead us to an organizing, common principle: that the bestowal of a baptismal name was the parents' expression of gratitude either for material possessions (including parental inheritance) or for life itself. Assuming a common religious framework, a common language, and extensive mutual adjustment among adjacent communities, one could posit a shared ideology, refracted, to use a venerable term (Evans-Pritchard 1956:107), through highly localized differences in residential and inheritance rules. Later work (e.g., Herzfeld 1991:131-33) provided more examples that appeared to confirm the initial hypothesis.

Although I still think that both this work and the conclusions I drew from it are viable, it does represent a relatively "safe" form of comparison. While it may interest specialists in kinship and naming systems, or area studies specialists, it is not likely to have a broader appeal except, perhaps, as a methodological exercise. It allowed for a very structured kind of comparison within eminently recognizable parameters. But just as metaphors possess disclosive potential more or less in proportion to their shock value (Crick 1976:135), a distance that in theory is subject only to the degree of conceptual stretching that audiences can tolerate, so comparison among less obviously comparable entities may generate more heuristic energy if the grounds for such a stretch—what we might call "feasibility conditions"—are clear.

### VARIATIONS OF REFLEXIVITY

At one level, the fundamental ground of comparison is almost always the self of the ethnographer. I do not intend to recommend a narrowly introspective display of self. But there are many other kinds of reflexivity. Anthropologists are also focal points for the accumulation of ideas, whether epistemological preferences or cultural (or even idiosyncratic) values. Thus, for example, telling stories about one's innermost thoughts or bodily sensations may illustrate some point of cultural similarity or difference—a technique that has been employed, for example, in studies of the body's engagement with physical labor (Coy 1989; Jackson 1983; Kondo 1990); here, reflexivity about the grounding of knowledge in the body affords access, descriptive as well as analytic, to differences in the collective representation of experience.

A related form of reflexivity entails treating cultural and social anthropology itself as an artifact. Aware of both its longer history as an ideological defense of Western imperialism that became increasingly self-critical as it became globalized, and of my own personal trajectory within that encompassing process, I began to think about parallels between the birth and development of that discipline and of my chosen locus of research, modern Greece, as *comparanda*. Both were the

products of the West European desire to define occidental excellence in relation to an equally reified East (see Said 1978); both were taxonomic consequences of that desire; and both contained the possibility for their own revision, which began in earnest at about the same time—anthropology's, with the advent of systematic fieldwork by Malinowski and others, who discovered that natives were real people; that of Greece, with the collapse of Greek irredentist dreams in the Greco-Turkish War that ended in 1922. Both anthropology and Greece—each a site of self-essentializing representations—have occasionally relapsed into older habits of thinking; both have also entertained a vast array of competing views at all points along the way. There are differences, to be sure; otherwise, comparison would be a pointlessly solipsistic exercise. But what might have struck some as a particularly indigestible ingredient of this project (Herzfeld 1987a) was the idea that one could compare a discipline and a country—that both, as composite ethnographic reflections of their respective social, cultural, and political contexts, could be viewed within a common framework. Nonetheless, I suggest, such an exercise is an essential prolegomenon to any true comparativism; unless anthropology makes of itself a reflexive object, views itself in the looking-glass of national and other cultures generated by the same impulses that created anthropology itself (see also Handler 1985), its claims to comparativism as a defining feature fall very flat indeed.

Thus, any comparison the goal of which is to disclose new insights rather than merely to increase a typology logically depends on a serious commitment to reflexivity—a perspective rooted in the experiences of individual anthropologists and in the encompassing social and cultural history that generates the will to compare in the first place. If the comparison of anthropology and Greece seems shocking—confusing as it does the boundary between observer and observed—this perhaps, if we will let it, will imbue it with greater disclosive force.

### MOVING OUT

Even the exercise I have just described did not immediately seem to propel my comparativist thoughts beyond the narrow horizons of the Greek case, although my training had always led me to think in terms of models generated in Africa, Asia, and elsewhere (and so also to contend with Western-inspired Greek reactions that denied the relevance of such “exotic” *comparanda* altogether). Around 1989, however, I began to think about enlarging those horizons. The first real jump was to Italy—that other pillar of Europe's classical past: the prospects for comparison were obvious and very alluring. About a decade later I was in Rome, doing fieldwork on the politics of the past.<sup>5</sup>

I had been reluctant to move into an area where I did not enjoy the advantages of accumulated expertise to a remotely comparable degree. But once the dam breaks, it breaks. If Italy, a country I adored in my much-traveled childhood, seemed a good option, a schooldays friendship led me to Thailand a few years ago, and I am now also firmly committed to field research on related issues there. Thailand offers immediate comparability with Greece, in that both countries,

recently released from dictatorships that fortified themselves against alleged communist expansionism from neighboring lands, have been heavily dependent on a “West” that has never officially colonized either (see Thongchai 2000). The comparison between Greece and Italy is both syntagmatic (they have a historical relationship) and paradigmatic (they share formal characteristics); that between Greece and Thailand is more exclusively paradigmatic, unless we focus on the seventeenth-century Greek adventurer Phaulkon’s involvement in the Ayutthaya Kingdom of Siam. A reflexive comparativism of some complexity, allowing reflection on the history of “the West” and its sociocultural effects on today’s populations outside the simplistic binarism of colonizer and colonized, thus unfolds here from a once far narrower formulation. We have seen how Mediterraneanism reproduces the orientalist power dynamic. This is not merely a matter of searching for the exotic closer to home (Davis 1977:7); it also results in an exclusion of Mediterranean lands, much like that of Thailand, from comparative discussions of the effects of colonialism (Cyprus and Malta are simply too small, it seems, to play much of a role). Postcolonial criticism has its own exclusions; the absence in Martin Bernal’s otherwise magisterial *Black Athena* (1987) of any mention of the devastating effects of nineteenth-century “Aryanist” philology on the genesis and marginalization of modern Greece is a good illustration.

### THE MEDITERRANEAN AS CONSTRUCT AND AREA

The call to create a comparative sociology of the Mediterranean (Peristiany 1966; Davis 1977) rested on assumptions about similarity—especially in the treatment of values called honor and shame. These assumptions were grounded in the ethnographers’ own assumptions about translatability and equivalence, assumptions that in turn sustained—and were sustained by—the seemingly hermetic character of village societies. While it has become a truism that societies are not really isolated even when they seem to be, that view of them died hard. The monistic model was in part sustained by a general reluctance—eventually undercut, I suggest, by work done in Europe and elsewhere in the “West,” another case of collective cultural reflexivity (see Asad et al. 1997)—to address the transnational and boundary-challenging processes that arose from the traffic in goods and ideas so richly celebrated by the Mediterraneanists’ spiritual forebear, Fernand Braudel (1972).

The kinds of similarity that permitted, for example, the study of baptismal naming already mentioned are the result of historical processes that preclude any kind of hermetic view. These village societies may have evolved somewhat separately, but they also spoke and symbolized in common terms, sustained by commerce and intermarriage (with the possible exception of a few endogamous communities). Their relationship is thus not only paradigmatic, but also syntagmatic, in the sense I have already suggested for comparisons among nation-states.

Comparison entails equivalence, the basis of which has been held to lie in the act of cultural translation (Crick 1976; Geertz 1973). We know that there is



something comparable because we can “translate” it across boundaries (this being a fairly literal application of the word’s etymological derivation as “carrying across”). Yet translations, which are syntagmatic as process, are usually treated as paradigmatically linking entities: despite the meticulous ethnography in which they are presented, *onore* and *honra* and *filotimo* and *nif* and *namus* end up seeming to be always-already in place, awaiting only the ethnographer capable of recognizing—rather than constructing—their inherent mutual translatability, and their collective reducibility to the English-language term “honor.” This is the besetting circularity of the Mediterraneanist model of honor and shame (see Herzfeld 1984, 1987a:7-9).

Talal Asad (1993) has trenchantly criticized the translation metaphor in anthropology as replicating inequality between the translator and the translated. Rather than disposing of the translation metaphor altogether, as he appears to recommend, I would prefer to maintain it in productive tension with the awareness created when “they read what we write”—a deliberately discomfiting act of both comparison and reflection, and one that expands rather than restricts the realm of the empirical. In this view, I follow Tambiah (1990:127) in viewing cultural translation, not as a single reductive act, but, to the contrary, as an ongoing procedure leading us to a recognition of irreducible uniqueness that we can initially only grasp through what instead appear to be familiar or comparable features. The political inequality (or “incommensurability”) implied by Asad’s reading of the translation metaphor is a relative quality; we can seek to overcome it by degrees. Emphasizing the inadequacy of the translation is itself an insight-producing act.

In respect of the translation of foreign-language terms in ethnographic texts, however, Asad’s argument is much more comprehensively persuasive: translation reduces several terms to a single dominant one in the translator’s language. The trick is surely to turn that essentially political insight against itself—to examine and dissect empirically the political processes whereby the anthropologists’ own analytic categories reproduce current political imperatives in the countries in question. Whose interests are served by essentializing “Mediterranean culture,” and how is this reproduced in everyday social life? It is not that “the Mediterranean” does not exist; it exists as a representation. But even relatively hardlining objectivists recognize this contingent aspect of reality and the role that representation can play in furthering violence and devastation (e.g., Hammel 2000:20-21).

The debate about the “unity of the Mediterranean” (Gilmore 1987), nominalistic though it was, lasted for a long while—this in itself being a sign of its political appeal. The main objections to Mediterraneanism were that it glossed over important local differences and that its mutual entailment with the so-called Mediterranean culture area led to circular argumentation and self-fulfilling prophecies (Pina-Cabral 1989; Herzfeld 1984; Lever 1986). Defenders of the faith have instead argued that there are identifiable similarities among the cultures of the region and that these call for explanation (Davis 1977; Gilmore 1987).

I certainly have no objections to the latter goal. But proponents of Mediterraneanism usually ignore the entailment of scholarship in the promotion of

value-based local identities. Who cultivates these, and to what ends? Anthropologists are certainly implicated, beguiled, it seems by informants who play the role of diligent comparativists. Similar questions can be asked everywhere. Do Thais and Vietnamese in Israel, for example, find that cultural commonalities outweigh the differences between them? Is the solidarity they experience phrased as regional, religious, or simply based on the status of immigrant workers? How do they respectively relate to the dynamics of Arab-Jewish relations there? Listening to what “informants” have to say about each other can generate important insights into the relevance of specific comparative projects for making sense of their everyday lives.

### COMPARATIVISTS LOCAL AND EXTERNAL

The sense of regional similarity may be strong to begin with, but it may be particularly reinforced by displacement or invasion; this suggests, again, that it flourishes under what we might call conditions of enforced comparativism. When I was doing fieldwork in the early 1970s, I was frequently told that the local Greeks offered the Italian occupiers both fierce resistance (here the emphasis is on an alleged difference between indolent and cowardly Italians and high-spirited and freedom-loving Greeks) and warm hospitality (which served as a sign of both the Greeks’ moral superiority [Herzfeld 1987b] and their warm feelings toward these relatively gentle occupiers). When the Germans arrived, the local Greeks suddenly realized that they had not been as badly off under the Italians as they were now. The difference is one that the Germans themselves recognized, which is why they rarely entrusted the roundups of Jews, both in the Dodecanese and in Italy itself, to their supposed comrades-in-arms, the Italian fascists. Rhodian villagers told me that they admired the Germans’ self-discipline, and especially the fact that “they never touched our women,” but that they felt much more comfortable with the Italians—precisely the theme of the popular and aptly named film *Mediterraneo* (Monteleone 1992).

To explain this apparent similarity, my Greek friends cited a proverb: *mia fatsa, mia ratsa* (literally, “one face, one race”). This expresses the biogenetic determinism, so central to Greek popular ideas about cultural proximity, that the “blood” of one’s own people (whether kin or fellow-nationals) “boils” more easily with both enthusiasm and anger. The term *ratsa* is etymologically cognate with various incarnations of “race,” including the Italian *razza* and Spanish *raza*; and, like these, it is often specified as a patrilineal conception of the entire nation seen as united in their common agnatic blood. The saying “*mia fatsa, mia ratsa*” is in fact a hellenized version of what Greeks stoutly assert is an Italian saying, thereby generically co-opting the Italians in the Greeks’ version of pan-Mediterraneanism. The actual story of this proverb is more complex, as is evident in the astonishment Italians vacationing in Greece display when they recount hearing this claim.

When Rhodian villagers used this phrase, they were trying to assimilate themselves to a *simpatico* neighbor and so claim a more impressive identity for themselves. But they often did so in the specific context of comparing the Italians

to the Germans, as occupiers. Why did the villagers want to make such comparisons? Like many other Greeks, they experienced deep ambivalence about just where their own identity belonged in the global hierarchy—whether they were part of “the East” or “the Mediterranean.” If in fact they were Mediterranean, they could legitimately regard an easygoing attitude as the hallmark of truly civilized beings, even while admitting that this also brought those same human beings into the framework of a distinctly libidinous (not to say scurrilous), but deeply familiar, form of sociability. If, on the other hand, they were part of “the West,” the iron self-discipline they attributed to the Germans (“they never touched our women”) could be assimilated to their own ideal-typical moral concepts of chastity and respect, glossed as “honor” in the Mediterraneanist literature. That the Germans did not “bother” their women could reciprocally be construed as a sign that the Germans saw them as fellow-Westerners, rape being reserved only for enemy women (as we have tragically seen in recent years in Bosnia and Kosovo, where similar ideas obtain).<sup>6</sup>

I heard the *ratsa* proverb in Crete too, but there more in the context of villagers’ experiences as *Gastarbeiter* in Germany (unlike the Rhodians, the Cretans had not experienced the Italians as occupiers during World War II): they found their Italian co-workers—as well as Turks and Yugoslavs—to be much more congenial than their German hosts. For the Cretans, especially given their particularly bitter memories of the Nazi occupation, there is no particular desire to assimilate to the Germans—Italians are quite European enough.

Here we see a highly motivated use of cultural comparison by informants. This is also true of the Italians who rejected the idea that the proverb might be of Italian origin: leftists who were understandably distrustful of anything remotely suggestive of the fascist era, they were at the same time slightly incredulous that the Greeks would want to emphasize precisely those commonalities that Italians found least edifying. Perhaps, too, they felt slightly discomfited at looking quite so much like the charmingly villainous Greek villagers they encountered while on vacation. But if here, in addressing motives and meanings I am merely speculating, one thing seems clear; like all stereotypes, these attributions of similarity and affinity have less to do with verifiable descriptions of fact than with performances of contrastive identity. They are comparisons, effected in relation to performed and constructed selves. As such, they are not unlike the comparisons offered by anthropologists. Rather than positing a set of conveniently countrylike “cultures” with neatly drawn boundaries and countable sets of culture traits, we can thus more usefully focus on how discourses of common identity are used by social actors, to what ends, and with what effects. That is a fundamentally comparative project; it is not about fixed identities, but about the contexts in which they acquire significance.

In this spirit, one of the motivations for my recent turn to Italy was the contrast that the everyday discourse of identity there offered with what one encounters in Greece. Framed by the commonality of their being the twin *loci classici* of European civilization in its most self-congratulatory mode, Greece and Italy—despite their shared Mediterranean-ness—could hardly, in some respects, be more different. In Greece, all roads do lead to Athens: the country is not only

bureaucratically centralized, but *astifilia*—the desire for urbanity—translates into Athenocentrism. Except for the views of their own residents, other Greek cities do not count. In Italy, by contrast, Rome is considered by many to be lacking in culture—a provincial town with its own “rough” dialect (*romanesco*) and a population to match, glorious past or no glorious past; many Italians are prouder of their local prehistoric and Renaissance monuments than of anything imposed by imperial Rome. (Greeks are often embarrassed to speak a local dialect, except as a mark of intimacy; Italians, prominent among them the Romans, are avid language localists. Greeks will draw a contrast between “our dialect” and “correct Greek”; Italians between, say, *romanesco* and *italiano*.) And while Greeks bristle at the slightest criticism of the nation-state (whatever they think of the government, which they are apt to portray as “foreign” anyway), Italians reserve that kind of defense for their home city—the only time one sees many national flags out in Rome, for example, seems to be during major World Cup matches.

In Greece, even positive relationships often start from some sort of agonistic encounter—Cretan villagers stole sheep “to make friends” (Herzfeld 1985); Sarakatsan couples married to unite mutually hostile families (Campbell 1964:137). Such attitudes seemed to pervade even the rarefied air of academic institutions. Fair enough, some will say: this is what we would expect in a Mediterranean society, which by definition ought to be agonistic. But it is also fair to ask why and how such attitudes are reproduced: even if they avoid generalizing descriptions of “the Greeks” (see Fabian 1983:80), Greeks themselves frequently use them. Moreover, when I began fieldwork in Rome, I found that Romans simply threw up their hands in the face of any aggression, saying, “Let it go!” (*Lassa stá*.) A pedestrian who caused a car to stop in Athens would face immediate and graphic hostility; Roman drivers, having first tried to give the pedestrian a nice pedicure, simply wait for the next chance. I am tempted to view the difference in historical and economic terms. Rome is a merchant city; its people are pragmatists. Urban Greeks are recent arrivals from the countryside, where agonistic values are touted as the only viable way to survive.

But this is simplistic. While Italy experienced an “economic miracle” despite rampant corruption and church interference, Greece is locked into an “underdog” view of its place in the world (Diamandouros 1994)—perhaps because it so easily becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy of failure under the tutelage of self-interested great powers—which generates a chip-on-the-shoulder attitude that most Italians, visiting Greece for the first time (note yet another kind of comparison here), find nothing short of astonishing. In other words, the difference may be primarily political, the product of a global, hegemonic hierarchy of culture.

Note what I am not doing here. I am not attempting comparison between formalized “things” or “entities.” I am not talking about a formally controlled comparison. I am instead trying, first, to relate the *comparanda* to their respective contexts in the spirit of the view of metaphor sketched above; and then, second, to see how my own interest in the comparison has led me to highlight some aspects at the expense of others. I am fascinated by the tolerance of “letting go” in Rome because I encountered it in the declining years of a particular kind of orientalist

comparativism (“Mediterraneanism”), the tenets of which it appears to belie in no uncertain terms.

Of course we could always say that the Romans, as heirs to a great and very specific urban tradition, were not “typically Mediterranean” or “Mediterranean peasants.” One might even say that letting things go was simply an instance of what is seen as the typically relaxed Italian approach to life (but why is there then no Greek equivalent, for example?). These statements are accurate as far as they go, but they miss the point: that both Romans as well as other Italians use the stereotype of relaxed “southerners” to describe Romans themselves, although often for quite divergent purposes. The question of whether such attributions are “true” is falsely posed. I am comparing, not “the stereotypes themselves,” but how people use stereotypes. And the goal is to decipher, not an underlying code or structure, but the unstable play of power in social and cultural relations.

### TIME AND THE SELF

The heading of this concluding section paraphrases Johannes Fabian’s magisterial *Time and the Other* (1983), a critique of the exoticism entailed in anthropological descriptions that, in writing generically of entire peoples, banish them to another time—precisely the thrust of my argument against “Mediterraneanism.” We ourselves carry a set of cultural and epistemological assumptions about the nature of time and place that are fundamental to the ways in which we conceptualize the societies we study.

Rosalind Morris, writing about changes in conceptualizations of spirit mediumship in the Thai city of Chiangmai, attempts “a comparative sketch of these different timespaces, one that explains how it is that a discourse of presencing in which time constitutes the primary organizing principle can be displaced by one structured by spatial logics” (Morris 2000:161). Morris clearly shows that, for her, a postmodern idiom and a comparative approach are by no means mutually incompatible. Unless we examine the personal trajectory by which Morris arrived at her account of cultural change and examine the terms in which she couches it, however, we will be obstructing, rather than facilitating, a genuine reflection on the construction of anthropological knowledge. Morris’s own language is embedded—as our technical language often is—in spatial metaphors (“displaced,” “structured”); moreover, she classically opposes history, “premised on the absolutely irremediable difference among moments,” to cosmology—which, like Lévi-Strauss’s myth (1964:24), serves as a “machine for the suppression of time.”

These are familiar conventions. The question is not so much whether they are wrong or inappropriate—Morris uses them to say something new and interesting—as how far they correspond to the perceptions of the social actors she examines or of local scholars who might read her book. We should ask how *those* comparisons might be developed. Once again, the intellectual activity of comparison emerges as part and parcel of everyday social life as much as of scholarly ethnography. And scholars who can ask these questions to particularly good effect may well be anthropologists who have never had the means or desire to

do fieldwork far from home, and for whom varying degrees of “insiderhood” among those other ethnographers of their own familiar haunts provide yet another framework for a reflexive, critical form of comparison.

I do not intend here the stultifying, nominalistic debates about whether “native” or “outsider” perspectives are more useful—this is itself a politically and socially embedded comparative question—but rather the open-ended critical dialogue so persuasively urged by the Greek anthropologist Dimitra Gefou-Madianou (1993; see also Panourgiá 1995). To say that I do not yet know how Thai scholars are reading Morris’s book (and especially her own categories of space and time) is not only a consequence of its newness; it also exposes—appropriately—my own newness in this field, and it highlights the intellectual economy whereby relatively few copies of foreign scholarly works on Thailand circulate widely in Thailand or exist in Thai translations.

The mutual comparisons for which I am calling here would help us avoid one of the pitfalls against which Fabian (1983:42-43) warns: despite the allure of “discovering” alien modes of cognition, temporal and spatial markers do not necessarily indicate experiences of time and space that are radically different from our own. In Thai, the sentence “It’s been four years since I got to know him” could be read by a naïve English speaker as “literally” meaning “I know him coming [from] four years already” (*phom ruucak khao sii pii maa leew*). But whether this spatializes time any more than the English expression “four years ago” is unclear. Do native speakers so experience it? Do they all experience it in the same way? Is the sense of spatiality simply the product of an internal comparison—that is, with the ethnographer’s own language? Conversations with Thai friends have, at the very least, stiffened my resistance to glib generalities about “the way Thais think” and in the process suggested new questions to ask about possible relationships between time-space categories and the political uses of the past.

Such comparisons perhaps have more disclosive force when they are made within a single language. Thus, to return to Greece, islanders in the Dodecanese, which was only incorporated into the Greek state in 1947-1948, still spoke, at the time of my fieldwork there, of “when Greece came here”—transforming the spatial image of incorporation into one of invasive movement, and thereby expressing quiet resentment of Athens. Yet while I may be able to offer a plausible account of the political basis of this expression, I doubt whether this signifies, at some deeper and more general level, that islanders understand the encompassing principles of time and space in ways that radically differ from official perceptions. On the contrary, I suspect that the islanders are taking advantage of the fact that the official ideology of a homogeneous language and culture is precisely what allows them to tweak the semantic nose of the state: the discourse with which they play is one they share with officialdom.

The anthropologist’s own life trajectory may also induce a sense of difference, and we must recognize this effect: it is as deeply implicated in translation and exegesis as any underlying “pattern” in the culture. Comparison, presented as a “simultaneity” (to use the term that Morris [2000:161] contrasts with history), actually occurs across the history of the analyst’s growing awareness of data,

issues, and methods. The time of the professional self is diachronic.

Thus, I am socially not quite the same person who did fieldwork as a graduate student in Greece. Through an internal act of comparison, I do recognize weaknesses that were not apparent (at least to me) when I was doing my doctoral research. The fact that the level of my Thai is currently far below that of my Greek and Italian, for example, has some salutary consequences. First, I approach a cultural situation that I have only *begun* to study, as a full professor in a powerful institutional nexus, from the perspective of having to experience again the sometimes humiliating failures that are integral to fieldwork—in which it is above all our embarrassments that teach us. That in turn has already caused me to reflect on what had become the increasing and perhaps deceptive sense of “getting it right” in the languages I know better (including English). My frequent discomfiture in Thai is a formidable weapon against the illusion of intellectual security into which my present circumstances might otherwise lure me, and it is sustained by the remorseless but affectionate criticism of friends who care enough to keep me aware of my weaknesses (as in their criticisms of this article, for example). It is they who constantly, firmly, lead me back to a rueful consideration of the lack of fit between what I know about Greece or Italy and what I know about Thailand. When I was writing this article, for example, extremely intense conversations about expressing time and space in Thai not only led to the intensive revision of what I have just written, but now make studying historic conservation (a key theme in my comparative interest in the local refractions of nationalism) a much more exciting prospect. How can one’s understanding of the categories of space and time *not* be crucial to the comparative analysis of how the past is managed politically and architecturally? Even as local scholars respond to some of the ideas that I generated in my Greek fieldwork, they also compel close attention to what they in turn have to say about the underlying assumptions and the implications of such work for research on social struggles over the past in Italy and Thailand.<sup>7</sup>

Finally, one’s personal trajectory has its own, multiple historical relationships to the societies under study and carries its own peculiar responsibilities as a result. In Thailand, for example, the huge price paid for a compromised political independence in the coin of cultural emulation (not to speak of political and economic dependency) is part of the context in which all anthropologists viewed as being “from the West” must work. The globetrotting that brings them to Thailand carries the historic weight of that context, since most local colleagues may not have had the opportunity—and indeed may lack the interest—to view their country in a large-scale comparative framework.

Yet scale should not be interpreted as equivalent or proportional to significance. Not only are the local scholar’s comparisons (whether of more closely located or related societies or of different anthropologists’ interpretations) as significant as the globetrotter’s, but the latter become merely parochial and self-serving—indeed, nominalistic, solipsistic, and circular!—unless they are inserted anew into the range of *comparanda* to be examined by scholars local and global alike. If we remember that those we study are also studying us as well as themselves, and that they are all engaged in the human exercise of understanding

the play of cultural difference and similarity, we may be able to contribute to making comparison the fruitful, congenial, and open-ended conversation that the discipline's ethical as well as intellectual commitments demand.

### NOTES

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2. See D'Andrade 1995 and Scheper-Hughes 1996 for an attempt, not entirely successful, at "dialogue" between these two positions.

3. See also Gupta and Ferguson 1997:8-16; Passaro 1997. On the relationship between social intimacy and the "cultural intimacy" that official discourses protect from prying external (ethnographic and other) eyes, and to which ethnography provides access, see Herzfeld 1997a:90.

4. I have attempted variations on this commitment by comparing the respective views of shared experiences by the ethnographer and the novelist (Herzfeld 1997b), and the discipline of anthropology with the Greek nation-state as parallel products of Western cultural ideologies (Herzfeld 1987a).

5. I am grateful to the National Endowment for the Humanities and the John Simon Guggenheim Foundation for their fellowship support during 2000-2001, although the responsibility for the outcome is entirely my own.

6. The issue of rape is still more complex. I have argued that men's avoidance of sexual intercourse with wives at times of war in Crete may have been a direct consequence of the patrilineal ideology in which one avoided even symbolic aggression against the *ratsa* of an ally (in this case, of one's affine) (Herzfeld 1987a:177-79).

7. See Khajohnjob 1999 and Palumbo 1998 for examples of relevant work in Thailand and Italy, respectively.

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