ON TWO MODALITIES OF COMPARISON IN SOCIAL ANTHROPOLOGY

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INTRODUCTION

> "What we really need to avoid is not errors, but significant ones from which we
> can't recover. Even significant errors are okay as long as they are easy to find."
> (Wimsatt 2007 24)

The classic anthropological move which consists in reading one's field material through the
lens of opposing a named group of people to 'the West' has long been the focus of vehe-
ment critique (See for instance Said 2003; Fabian 1983; Carrier 1992; Pina Cabral 2006).
What better way to introduce these critiques than through an unstinting review by one
anthropologist who despite everything, persists in deploying such dualisms:

> In closing this introduction I should insert a note about my own use of the concepts
> of 'the Western' and 'the modern'. These concepts have been the source of no end
> of trouble for anthropologists, and I am no exception. Every time I find myself us-
> ing them, I bite my lip with frustration, and wish that I could avoid it. The objec-
> tions to the concepts are well known: that in most anthropological accounts, they
> serve as a largely implicit foil against which to contrast a 'native point of view'; that
> much of the philosophical ammunition for the critique of so-called Western or
> modern thought comes straight out of the Western tradition itself (thus we find
> such figures as the young Karl Marx, Martin Heidegger and Maurice Merleau-
> Ponty enlisted in the enterprise of showing how the understandings of North
> American Indians, New Guinea Highlanders or Australian Aborigines differ from
> those of 'Euro-Americans'); that once we get to know people well – even the inhab-
> itants of nominally Western countries – not one of them turns out to be a full-
> blooded Westerner, or even to be particularly modern in their approach to life; and
> that the Western tradition of thought, closely examined, is as richly various, multi-
> vocal, historically changeable and contest-riven as any other. (Ingold 2000 *6-7*)

And yet, despite this repeated critical onslaught and these now well-known charges, the
use of "paired, dialectically generated essentializations" (Carrier 1992) doesn't simply per-
sist in anthropology - it is seemingly on the up. In this paper, I argue that both the weak-
nesses and the paradoxical persistence of this form of anthropological argument are better
explained if we consider it as one of a linked pair of comparative heuristics. Such 'frontal
comparison', in which an unfamiliar ethnographic entity is contrasted to a putatively famil-
iar background, is intimately intertwined and co-implicated with 'lateral comparisons', in
which a number of 'cases' are laid side by side. The first part of this paper develops this
contrast. In the second I examine the ways in which frontal comparison was reborn from
its ashes after the epistemological bonfire of the 1980s. The third part focuses on the dy-
namic whereby, while frontal comparison has monopolised anthropologists' epistemic at-
tention and concern over recent decades, methodological and epistemological discussions
of lateral comparison were – with a few notable exceptions (see for instancePedersen &
Nielsen 2013; Strathern 2004) – relegated to the doldrums of an outdated positivism. The
'rise' of frontal comparison is partly an effect of this unequal exposure - lateral comparison
continues apace, of course, operating mostly under the epistemic radar to support and
counterbalance its more showy frontal counterpart. The fourth and final part examines this
persistence, vitality and diversity of lateral comparison through a close reading of one sin-
gle anthropological argument. The conclusion returns to the interdependence of the two
heuristics, and argues that it is time to bring lateral comparison back into the light.

In referring to frontal and lateral comparison as heuristics, I do not mean this in the rather weak and loose sense in which this term is sometimes invoked by authors in regards to their own arguments. Saying that particular claims or moves are 'merely heuristic' can be rather cheap exculpatory hand-waving – a way to divert attention from the failings and limitations of particular arguments, rather than to confront such points of failure. Instead, I use heuristic in the technical sense articulated by philosopher of science William Wimsatt. Heuristics, according to Wimsatt, are conceptual devices which have six main characteristics (Wimsatt 2007 346). They

1. make no guarantees
2. are cost-effective
3. are systematically biased
4. transform a problem into a nonequivalent but intuitively related problem
5. are purpose-relative
6. are descended from other heuristics.

The usual offhand exculpatory reference to heuristics only takes in points 1 and 2. But the notion really begins to come into its own as a tool for thinking through theory and practice with point 3: heuristics are systematically biased. That is to say, they don't simply fail, they fail in regular and predictable ways. Wimsatt describes this distinctive pattern of error as the heuristic's 'footprint' (Wimsatt 2007 80). Having a consistent footprint is one of the main keys to the value of heuristics. It allows one to decide for which purposes a heuristic is useful, and for which it will be systematically misleading (cf. Point 5). It allows one to match up different heuristics which can support each other in useful ways to build up a 'robust' picture (Wimsatt 2007 44). Conversely, it allows one to avoid relying on a set of heuristics which have significantly overlapping footprints - which systematically fail in the same way - thereby tending to produce a false sense of robustness.

Wimsatt's attempts to 're-engineer' the philosophy of science through notions such as that of heuristics offers a number of strikingly valuable and so far untapped resources for anthropologists to think with. Although I don't have space to develop many of its implications here, they are far-reaching, both epistemologically and ontologically. But even simply taking seriously the notion of heuristics as defined above might help to shift the ways in which disciplinary debates are carried out. Treating our own and each other's concepts, techniques and assumptions as a bundle of perfectible heuristics has two valuable effects. One is to keep sharp the sense that they are 'only' heuristics - thereby avoiding the somewhat tiresome debates produced by and around grandstanding proposals for any particular approach as the only, or the most valuable, or the most moral, way to do anthropology. A heuristic goes bad when it forgets it is a heuristic. The other valuable effect is to remind us that particular concepts, approaches, and so forth are at least heuristic. That is to say that they tend to do useful work despite and even because of their points of failure. Diagnosing such points of failure becomes, not a destructive 'ruination' of other approaches or paradigms (Navaro-Yashin 2009), an 'all-or-nothing critique', but rather a critical recognition of temporary vantages and unstable achievements (Anderson 2001 32; Pina-Cabral 2009).

The distinction between lateral and frontal comparison itself is, of course, a heuristic one - by which, as I hope the above makes clear, I don't mean you should just let me get away with it. Rather, the questions which I hope will remain at the forefront of your mind as you read this are: what is achieved by this distinction, and at what cost? If in the end, the heuristic itself doesn't pass muster, at least we will have performed together an instance of the kind of broader exercise (thinking through heuristics) which this paper seeks to call forth and instantiate.

I. FRONTAL AND LATERAL COMPARISON

The best way to introduce the contrast between frontal and lateral comparison is by way of a rather old discussion. In the seminal paper which attacked Radcliffe-Brown's programme for anthropology as a natural science of society, Evans-Pritchard described the anthropologists' craft as consisting of a number of sequential and logically distinct operations. In the first "phase"

> "He goes to live for some months or years among a primitive people. He lives among them as intimately as he can, he learns to speak their language, to think in their concepts and to feel in their values. He then lives his experiences over again critically and interpretively in the conceptual categories and values of his own culture and in terms of the general body of knowledge of his discipline. In other words, he translates from one culture to another. " (Evans-Pritchard 1950 121)

In the second phase, the anthropologist "seeks by analysis to disclose the latent underlying form of a society or culture" (Evans-Pritchard 1950:122). Finally, in the third phase, the anthropologist "compares the structures his analysis has revealed in a wide range of societies" (Evans-Pritchard 1950:122). As he makes clear in a more extended discussion, what Evans-Pritchard has in mind here,is not the type of grand armchair exercise which was then commonly called "the comparative method", but rather a slow piecemeal procedure adapted to a discipline whose practitioners were each first and foremost fieldworkers themselves. One anthropologist conducts a study, reaches some conclusions (say about the role of religious cults in social life):

> "If he formulates these clearly and in terms which allow them to be broken down into problems of research it is then possible for the same, or another, anthropologist to make in a second society observations which will show whether these conclusions have wider validity. He will probably find that some of them hold, that some of them do not hold, and that some hold with modifications. Starting from the point reached by the first study, the second is likely to drive the investigation deeper and to add some new formulations to the confirmed conclusions of the first. [...] A third study is now made, and then a fourth and a fifth. The process can be continued indefinitely." (Evans-Pritchard 1951:89-90)

Evans-Pritchard's account serves as a useful yardstick by which to measure intervening changes in disciplinary common-sense. Almost every aspect of this description of anthropologist's craft might seem to have been dismantled in the intervening years. The breezy confidence with which Evans-Pritchard suggests that the first phase makes the society 'culturally intelligible' for a foreigner as it would be for an insider; the even breezier confidence that the second phase makes society 'sociologically intelligible' in ways that "no native can explain [and] no layman, however conversant with the culture , can perceive" (Evans-Pritchard 1950:121-22); the image of societies as stable units neatly lined up for consecutive analysis; the thought of comparative categories (e.g. 'religious cults') which simply require clear formulation in order to serve as a support for cumulative enquiry; the language of hypothesis testing; the value or possibility of structural abstraction; the possibility or desirability of a holistic account of a society; the very notion that the aim of anthropological work is to elicit similarities and tentative generalisations - these are amongst the main elements of Evans-Pritchard's picture which have been challenged, singly or together, and with varying degrees of success, by successive internal critiques of

the discipline.

Whatever else may have fallen away in the intervening years, however, Evans-Pritchard's account articulates one key contrast which remains in evidence to this day, namely, the complementarity of two different kinds of 'moves' or directions of anthropological comparison. Let us define comparison, in very general terms, as the move which brings together two different entities in order produce some effect (epistemic, ontological, political, etc.) through a consideration of their differences and similarities. At this level of abstraction, one can say that Evans-Pritchard's account begins with a frontal comparison between an ethnographic 'other' and the ethnographer's own 'background'. It ends with a lateral comparison in which different anthropological cases are confronted to each other.

The thought that these two moves represent consecutive 'phases' within a single analysis – or even, as Evans-Pritchard puts it, consecutive 'levels of abstraction' (Evans-Pritchard 1950:122) – doesn't bear much scrutiny. Indeed EP's own account undercuts this neat periodization. After all, when the ethnographer is, in the 'first' phase, reliving his field experience in the light of the body of knowledge of his discipline, is he not already drawing on the type of exercise described in the third 'phase'? However, the fact that frontal and lateral moves are interwoven at every step of anthropological knowledge-making, and that this process cannot be neatly decomposed into successive stages, doesn't reduce the heuristic value of Evans-Pritchard's distinction. Let me now try to articulate this.

On the face of it the difference between frontal and lateral comparison might seem to be easily summarised: the former are comparisons between 'us' and them', while the latter are comparisons between 'them', and 'them', and 'them', etc. Frontal comparison would thus be just a special case of lateral comparison, in which one of the entities involved happens to be the 'home society' of the anthropologist himself. But this masks a more profound difference between the two forms of comparison, which we can clearly recover from Evans-Pritchard's account: while lateral comparison involves entities which are formally of the same kind, although different in content, frontal comparison involves entities which are constitutively different in form - indeed, constitutively asymmetrical. The 'us' in frontal comparison is not the same sort of entity as the 'them'.

On the 'them' side of frontal comparison, there is an ethnographic object: a lived experience, personal to the ethnographer, which he will endeavour to describe and analyse for a readership presumed to be unfamiliar with it. On the 'us' side lie "the conceptual categories and values of his own culture and […] the general body of knowledge of his discipline" (Evans-Pritchard 1950 121). By opposition to the ethnographic object, which is a portion of a wide open uncharted territory 'out there', let me call this 'us' position the hinterland. The hinterland is the space behind the ethnographer, the commonplace conceptual shores from which he sailed out in the first place, the (partly) shared ground from which he and his intended audience draw their intellectual tools, assumptions and perspectives. Thus, the appearance of symmetry — of two 'cultures' or 'ontologies' facing up to each other — hides in plain sight the fact that the 'us' position, by definition, never needs as much elaboration as the 'them' position. By definition, an 'us' position is assumed to be shared, and thus can be briefly and sketchily drawn. Anthropologists may need to focus their audience's attention on particular aspects of their 'shared' hinterland (Western attitudes to objective knowledge, individual personhood, or common assumptions about animals, say), they might even draw on a few classic references or choice illustrative quotes to underpin these generalisations, but they do not need to elaborate on or ground these descriptions very much more than that.

Secondly, the hinterland is systematically partial and, in an important sense, secondary to the ethnography. As invoked in an ethnography, the hinterland only includes those aspects of 'our' background which are relevant by contrast to the ethnographic experience. The hinterland is made up of those parts of ourselves which the ethnography, by forcing us to make explicit, makes strange. It is the shadow cast by the ethnography on our own background, which it reveals, precisely, as background. Taken together, this and the previous point lead to a subtly paradoxical situation. The hinterland is by definition what is shared between the anthropologist and his readership, and yet at the very moment at which it is made explicit, it is no longer quite the position which the anthropologist himself occupies. The hinterland is always, simultaneously, shared common ground between the anthropologist and their readership, and also the evidence of what separates them, since the anthropologist 'also' has the ethnography which makes the hinterland evident as only hinterland.

Finally, just as this audience is hybrid (Evans-Pritchard imagined a readership composed of anthropologists and other westerners, or even simply anthropologists who are themselves westerners), so the hinterland is a hybrid of cultural and disciplinary assumptions - an important point to which I will return below.

Thus frontal comparison operates with constitutively asymmetrical entities: an ethnographic object which requires elucidation, and a hinterland which acts simultaneously as a frame and foil for this elucidation. By contrast, lateral comparison operates upon entities of the same kind. The entities involved in lateral comparison are not 'societies' per se – Evans-Pritchard is no naive empiricist –, but rather 'studies': the hybrid entity which results of an account of a society, or an aspect of a society by a specific situated ethnographer, steeped in broadly shared disciplinary problems and categories. The building blocks of lateral comparison, the units upon which it operates, are the results of a prior operation of frontal comparison (phase 1) and structural analysis (phase 2). Their usefulness for comparative purposes comes from their substantive differences of content, framed by a formal similarity. Studies, in order to be comparatively useful, should be the results of the same sort of procedure undertaken either by the same ethnographer, or at least by trusted fellow members of an epistemic community which shares a set of methods as well as clearly formulated categories and research problems. The entities involved in lateral comparison — studies — may be different in quality or value of course, but they are all equally accessible (as studies) to a shared readership.

The lateral/frontal distinction might bring to mind the distinction drawn by a number of scholars between 'interpretivist' (or humanist) and 'positivist' (or scientist) traditions in anthropology (Holý 1987a; Handler 2009; Lazar 2012). Yet these two distinctions differ in a number of crucial ways. While the positivist/interpretivist contrast seeks to map a 'paradigm shift' (Holý 1987a), frontal and lateral comparison are heuristics which are much older and much more basic. Frontal and lateral comparison are not mutually exclusive approaches to anthropology, they are frequently if not always interwoven, in the fabric of individual anthropological accounts. The distinction is also to a great extent independent of the other distinctions usually drawn between positivism and interpretivism (questions of aim, method, conception of the units to be compared, broader epistemological assumptions, and so forth).

For instance, Evans-Pritchard's own account makes evident the fact that those cathedrals of positivist lateral comparison, the classic volumes 'African Political Systems' (Fortes & Evans-Pritchard 1940), and 'African systems of Kinship and marriage' (Radcliffe-Brown 1950), relied on a frontal comparison by each ethnographer to build their own case.

Each volume, taken collectively also builds up to a frontal challenge to 'our' conceptions of statehood or the family, as their respective prefaces make clear. The great structuralist and neo-structuralist monuments to lateral comparison (Lévi-Strauss 1966; Descola 2005) operate on a very different lateral logic, as has often been pointed out (Salmon 2013). Yet here too we find frontal comparison playing a constitutive role both at the base of the work and at its summit, as it were. As for the 'interpretivists', Holy himself points out that one of the ways in which they sustained their – eminently 'frontal' – aim of elucidating cultural specificity was by comparing different practices within one cultural setting to demonstrate their commonality (Holý 1987b 12) - a lateral comparison if ever there was.

It is true, and I will return to this point below, that the positivist/interpretive shift can be characterised in part as a shift in the respective attention given to these two modalities of comparison. As Holy noted (ibid.), anthropologists working in traditions marked as hermeneutic have typically expended much energy on the question of the frontal encounter between observer and observed, while those usually described as positivist tended to put the emphasis on lateral work with cases. But even this approximation is incomplete. For one thing, as I note below, the focus on frontality has carried over into new anthropological traditions, like that of the ontological turn, which are in explicit ways cast against the cultural interpretivist tradition. For another, even within the landscape traditionally covered by the positivist/interpretivist distinction, there are important and frequent exceptions. Malinowski's writings on science, religion and magic in the Trobriands and the West for instance (Malinowski 1925), are a classic example of a frontal comparison with strong positivist leanings, while much of the work of Max Weber, to take only the most classic instance, is both hermeneutic and substantially engaged in lateral comparison.

In sum, one might say provisionally and very generally, that considered as heuristic devices, frontal and lateral comparison play clearly distinct roles, in anthropology and beyond. Frontal comparison is the heuristic device which achieves that old commonplace double move of anthropological elucidation: making the familiar strange and the strange familiar. This move is of course much older than anthropology itself, as has often been pointed out (Trouillot 1991) - it is a form of argument with a continuous history stretching back at least to Montaigne, and a discontinuous one which could probably be traced to Herodotus (Hartog 1980).

Lateral comparison, also an eminently old heuristic, is frequently understood as aiming to 'generalise' from particulars, to derive local or broader laws - this is certainly the account of it given by authors such as Radcliffe-Brown (Nadel 1951; Radcliffe-Brown 1951). In this mode, lateral comparison is about establishing similarities from diverse cases. But Evans-Pritchard's account allows us to step back and see that this is only one particular version of the lateral. Lateral comparisons, as Evans-Pritchard makes clear, will just as often produce more difference - new questions, variations, possibilities and topics of enquiry. That is why, whereas the process of deriving similarities from different cases points to a presumable endpoint of satisfactory or sufficient explanation, in Evans-Pritchard's broader view, lateral comparison "can be continued indefinitely." (Evans-Pritchard 1951:89-90). The aim is not summation, here, but more broadly "to drive the investigation deeper" (ibid.).

II. FULL FRONTAL ANTHROPOLOGY

> "[T]he device of the straw man obviated any need for a comparative view." (Strathern 1981 666)

Evans-Pritchard himself describes the frontal move as cultural 'translation', and it is

the lateral move which is for him akin to the comparative method. For the purposes of my argument, the additional issues introduced by the analogy with linguistic translation (See for instance Ingold 1993; Pina Cabral 1992; Asad 1986) are a red herring. Nevertheless, this usage is a good diagnostic tool to trace the enduring afterlife of the distinction between frontal and lateral comparison in anthropology. Thus we find an unbroken line of discussions of 'cultural translation', from Evans-Pritchard's students and collaborators (Lienhardt 1953; Beattie 1964), via criticisms by Talal Asad (1986), all the way to Eduardo Viveiros de Castro's article 'Perspectival anthropology and the method of controlled equivocation' (2004b) - one of the classic references of the contemporary revival of radical us/them contrasts I began with.

Viveiros de Castro's article sets itself up in explicit contrast to Fred Eggan's classic functionalist call for 'controlled comparison', the careful piecewise comparisons of related societies within limited areas. Viveiros de Castro's piece takes Eggan as a jumping-off point for a very different exercise: an attempt to sketch out an epistemological manifesto for anthropology as the radical elicitation of difference between the conceptual worlds of the native and the anthropologist. In the process of sketching out this vision, Viveiros de Castro distinguishes what I am calling lateral comparison (Ócomparison between different spatial or temporal instantiations of a given sociocultural form.Ô Viveiros de Castro 2004b 4) from the frontal move which he terms a 'translative comparison':

> "the translation of the "native's" practical and discursive concepts into the terms of anthropology's conceptual apparatus. I am talking about the kind of comparison, more often than not implicit or automatic (and hence uncontrolled), which necessarily includes the anthropologist's discourse as one of its terms, and which starts to be processed from the very first moment of fieldwork, if not well before." (Viveiros de Castro 2004b 4)

The distinction echoes Evans-Pritchard's but two key differences are instructive. Firstly, the nature of the hinterland, and with it, the way frontal comparison works as a heuristic have subtly changed. Secondly, the order and priority of frontal and lateral comparison are reversed.

The first change has been much discussed elsewhere. In some key ways, Evans-Pritchard's 'us' and Viveiros de Castro's 'us' are no longer the same. In the gap between them lie a series of political, historical and epistemic upheavals. The hinterland, as a heuristic device has been reconfigured and adapted to a new political and epistemic terrain. As a result, frontal comparison itself has changed its nature - up to a point.

Evans-Pritchard's frontal comparisons relied on and contributed to shore up a world in which the existence of broadly separate cultural or civilisational entities was a matter of fact. This is what has been described as a 'pluralist' landscape (Holbraad & Pedersen 2010): one cast in the language of parts and wholes, of "cultural packages, coherent inside and different from what is elsewhere" (Mol 2002). Evans-Pritchard's frontal comparisons also relied on the fact that anthropology as a project properly belonged to one of these. It is against this background that frontal comparison promised to provide the enlightening double move of making the familiar strange and the strange familiar. This dynamic is of course not innocent. It implies a certain set of assumptions about who anthropology is about and who it is for. As Geertz noted, anthropologists such as Evans-Pritchard wrote as if

> "its subjects and its audience were not only separable but morally disconnected, that the first were to be described but not addressed, the second informed but not

implicated" (Geertz 1988 132)

No anthropologist writing today can in conscience do so. How then, are we to understand the permanence of frontal comparisons? The answer is pragmatic and political: one of the payoffs of frontal comparison as a heuristic - its ability to force a critical reassessment of 'our own categories' (or indeed, more broadly, our own politics, our own commitments, etc.) was too valuable to be abandoned. This is why, just as the politically and epistemically untenable nature of 'othering' were being denounced, the frontal was nevertheless being reclaimed as 'cultural critique' (Marcus & Fischer 1999). Much of anthropology's political and epistemological soul-searching since the 80s focused on the problem of squaring that circle: how do you retain anthropology's critical potential to challenge 'our own assumptions' without taking for granted either a naive image of a world divided into distinct cultures, or anthropology's epistemic privilege in describing them?

Granted that frontal comparison is valued, however, how do we once again make it possible in a post-plural conceptual environment, when reference to standard cultural units and so forth is no longer explicitly defensible? One answer - by far the most common - has simply been to carry on with business as usual without worrying too much about the epistemic underpinnings of what one was doing - treating pluralist assumptions as 'heuristic' in a loose and weak sense.

There have however been two influential and explicit moves through which frontal comparison has been explicitly refashioned as a heuristic (in the strong technical sense) for a post-pluralist theoretical world. The first was to intensify both the polemical aspect of frontal comparison and its self-distancing dynamic. The hinterland to which a new object is confronted came to refer not to a set of assumptions (cultural and disciplinary) which could serve as a perfectible reading grid for the ethnography, but to a politically dominant view or conceptual position, one assumed to be broadly shared in the author's background, but one to which the author himself is inimical by definition: Western 'liberal' understandings of freedom, say, or Eurocentric notions of modernity'. The reference to an 'us' position then relies on the empirical claim that such a position is indeed held by many and as a result had concrete effects in the world, effects to which the work would provide a critical counterpoint. Thus for instance, Chakrabarty explains his continued reference to 'Europe' and 'India':

> "Europe" and "India" are treated here as hyperreal terms in that they refer to certain figures of imagination whose geographical referents remain somewhat indeterminate. [...] Liberal-minded scholars would immediately protest that any idea of a homogeneous, uncontested "Europe" dissolves under analysis. True, but just as the phenomenon of Orientalism does not disappear simply because some of us have now attained a critical awareness of it, similarly, a certain version of 'Europe,' reified and celebrated in the phenomenal world of everyday relationships of power as the scene of the birth of the modern, continues to dominate the discourse of history. Analysis does not make it go away." (Chakrabarty 2007 27-28)

The other move - less common although much discussed recently under the label of the ontological turn – was to transform the hinterland into a self-proving postulate: a device which allows frontal comparison recursively to establish the very difference it relies on. The key to the move was already present in what I referred to above as the duality of the hinterland: its double reference to a cultural background and a disciplinary one. The move,

introduced by Roy Wagner (Wagner 1981) and Marilyn Strathern (Strathern 1988) and popularized and fine-tuned since by others (Viveiros de Castro 2004b; Henare et al. 2007; Holbraad 2012), consists in radically collapsing those two aspects of the hinterland by establishing a comparison directly between the anthropologist's own analytical categories (culture, society, the individual, agency, etc.) and those of the people under study. In this encounter, between the anthropologist's own categories and those of the people under study, we have a new, incontrovertible foundation for the reality of difference, a new minimum inconcussum quid. "The general body of knowledge of the discipline" is, after all, revealed as just one aspect of "the conceptual categories of [our] own culture". Conversely, and in the same move, the existence of "our own culture" is minimally instantiated in "the general body of knowledge of the discipline" - or even simply in the selected categories which are being held up for examination by this particular anthropologist at this particular time.

The way in which Strathern, for instance, caveats her use of 'Western' in a footnote in the Gender of the Gift, highlights the effects of this move

> I wish to draw out a certain set of ideas about the nature of social life in Melanesia by pitting them against ideas presented as Western orthodoxy. My account does not require that the latter are orthodox among all western thinkers; the place they hold is as a strategic position internal to the structure of the present account." (Strathern 1988:12)

The account does not require the univocality of a Western Tradition because by itself, the very fact of this account and of the disciplinary background it addresses (classic notions of personhood, agency or society deployed by anthropologists) stands as sufficient indication that there is a broad Western hinterland to which the ethnography can be contrasted.

The most explicit version of this move to make the hinterland self-supporting comes from Tim Ingold. In the passage quoted above, immediately following his detailed exposition of all the limits of frontal comparisons as commonly practised in anthropology, Ingold continues:

> For those of us who call themselves academics and intellectuals, however, there is a good reason why we cannot escape 'the West', or avoid the anxieties of modernity. It is that our very activity, in thinking and writing, is underpinned by a belief in the absolute worth of disciplined, rational enquiry. In this book, it is to this belief that the terms 'Western' and 'modern' refer. And however much we may object to the dichotomies to which it gives rise, between humanity and nature, intelligence and instinct, the mental and the material, and so on, the art of critical disputation on these matters is precisely what 'the West' is all about. For when all is said and done, there can be nothing more 'Western', or more 'modern', than to write an academic book such as this. (Ingold 2000, *6-7*.)

These two ways of retooling the heuristic of frontal comparison - through political critique or through epistemic self-instantiation - are not mutually exclusive. At times they are explicitly combined to articulate a manifesto for 'permanent conceptual revolution' as an inherently political act (Holbraad et al. 2014). More profoundly, they also share and intensify the self-distancing logic which I already pointed out as being constitutive of Evans-Pritchard's hinterland: while the hinterland articulates a shared common ground, one which the readership will recognise without much elaboration, the very articulation of this shared common ground is the move in which the anthropologist distances herself from it.

At the moment at which 'culture' for instance becomes visible as 'our' analytical category, it is no longer straightforwardly part of the anthropologist's tool-kit.

Both ways of reloading the heuristic of frontal comparison evade the need to characterise the hinterland in the old pluralist terms as a culture or civilization. As a result, frontal comparison therefore offers no guarantees as to the extent or mapping of the hinterland it points to. But then, it never did. No one goes to Evans-Pritchards' accounts of Azande witchcraft, or indeed to Levi-Strauss' 'La pensée sauvage' for a close characterisation of western scientific assumptions (cf. Salmon 2013). To ask this of frontal comparison is to ask for the wrong thing. Frontal comparison is not, by definition, an ethnography of the hinterland. In fact, a defining feature of the heuristic is that to be deployed as a hinterland is to be constitutively excluded from such close analysis (Candea 2011; Viveiros de Castro 2011). An ethnography of the hinterland - an anthropology 'at home' – is a very different exercise altogether (Strathern 1987).

A more problematic, limitation of the renewed frontal comparison, is that it systematically risks eliding Western 'commonsense' with specific adversary theories. As Bas Van Fraassen wrote, "almost any philosopher will begin by explaining that he opposes the 'dominant' or 'received' view, and present his own as revolutionary." (Van Fraassen 1980 4), and anthropologists are no different in this respect. There is nothing inherently wrong with that, were it not for the frequent overlap in anthropologists' other commitments (epistemological, political and so forth). As a result, the hinterlands they sketch are frequently rather similar: Cartesian, Kantian, Neoliberal, individualist, and so forth. I am yet to find a frontal contrast which sets out to unsettle "our western Deleuzian assumptions", for instance. If the hinterlands are similar, this in turn has a tendency to bring the ethnographies into line. This to my mind, is the key to that frequently noted problem of frontal comparison -the ontological turn not excepted - the surprising similarity it paradoxically tends to produce from engagement with radically distinct ethnographic realities. Since the aim of frontal comparison is conceptual disturbance, this is a potentially rather serious failing.

III. THE PERSISTENCE OF THE LATERAL

In sum, then, frontal comparison as a heuristic has emerged, albeit transformed, from the epistemological bonfire of the 1980s. Reborn from its ashes as political critique, radical conceptual innovation, or in some cases both, frontal comparison survives, and indeed has floated to the top of our disciplinary agenda.

This story by itself is not new, it has been told before, although perhaps not quite in these terms. What I would like to draw attention to, is what is absent from it: no similar epistemological recuperation has been made or even attempted for lateral comparison. Lateral comparison was just as damaged, de jure, by the epistemic crisis of the 80s. Also like frontal comparison, it nevertheless continues to inhabit anthropological work – by definition we cannot do without it. But no one has bothered to articulate a new manifesto for its power or relevance.

This is indicative of a broader shift in focus and interests. For Evans-Pritchard, and many of those who followed him, the frontal comparison of 'their' concepts and 'ours' was a mere first step in the proper business of anthropological knowledge making. Crucial and constitutive of course, but by itself merely 'literary'. For Viveiros de Castro as for many anthropologists today, the situation is reversed. Lateral comparison is merely an optional type of anthropological investigation, while frontal comparison has become "a constitutive rule of the discipline" (Viveiros de Castro 2004b 4) the very definition of anthropology itself:

> anthropology's defining problem consists less in determining which social relations constitute its object, and much more in asking what its object constitutes as a social

relation—what a social relation is in the terms of its object, or better still, in the terms that emerge from the relation (a social relation, naturally) between the "anthropologist" and the "native." (Ibid.)

Thus Viveiros de Castro (following Asad) inverts Evans-Pritchard: "comparison is in the service of translation and not the opposite." (Viveiros de Castro 2004b 5 original emphasis). Looked at carefully, however, this inversion is also an encompassment. Progressively - and somewhat confusingly – 'comparison' in the text is broadly elided with 'translation'. Frontal comparison (translation) has become comparison tout court. Lateral comparison (looking at cases side by side) fades out of view altogether, while the discussion of frontal comparison is intensified and extended.

The move is not new. For the reasons outlined in the previous section, frontal comparison has received the lion's share of conceptual and methodological attention in anthropology since at least the 1970s. 'Translation', 'Othering', 'alterity', 'incommensurability', 'participant-observation', 'epistemic collapse', 'equivocation', 'recursivity' or 'symetrisation' — under these and other headings, the possibility, methods and effects of confrontations between 'us' and 'them' has been one of the most enduring subjects of concern for anthropological epistemologists (including those who now call themselves 'ontologists'). Explicit reflections on lateral comparison, by contrast, have been few and far between in past decades.

As I noted above, the beginnings of this shift have been rightly diagnosed by those who sought to characterise a move from 'positivism' to 'interpretivism' in anthropology in the 1970s (Holý 1987a). I would simply amend Holy's account to note that those he describes as 'positivists' did concern themselves with the 'frontal' questions of evidence, interpretation, the translation of native categories into analytical ones and the cortege of issues associated with this (eg. Lewis 1955 268). It is simply that, in the main, they treated these — as Evans-Pritchard himself did (Evans-Pritchard 1951 82-84) — as issues of individual technique and skill, workmanlike things which good anthropologists ought to learn to do well. These skills and techniques might be discussed in pedagogical situations, advice passed on from supervisors to students and so forth, but they did not require extensive explicit discussion in published academic fora, in the way that the more elaborate 'conceptual' problems of lateral comparison did. It may also be that resorting to 'tacit knowledge' as a regulative ideal was a way of dealing with the potential embarrassment caused by anthropologists' need to rely on an ultimately irreducibly 'subjective' method in a discipline that was striving for objectivity. However it may be, while lateral comparison was assumed to require a shared set of operational rules which invited much explicit discussion and debate, frontal comparison was in the main left to the individual initiative and possibly genius of practitioners, under the assumption that a set of tacit standards were in place.

In the main, the situation in the past three to four decades (well after the demise of 'interpretivism') has been the opposite. While anthropologists were busy worrying about the epistemic, ethical and political implications of frontal comparison, laying down principles and making explicit arguments about whether and how it should be done, lateral comparison continues apace as a workaday practice, mostly under the epistemological radar.

In discussions and in print, anthropologists are constantly drawing lateral comparisons between different subsets of their field experience, between different sites they have worked in, between different published cases within their broad geographic or thematic area of specialisation, or beyond. But this is rarely assumed to require any broader elaboration of shared standards on what is 'comparable' and how.

In sum, rather like frontal comparison in the 40s and 50s, lateral comparison today has mainly become a space of individual endeavour, regulated by tacit knowledge and mostly implicit skill-sets. Part of being a 'good' anthropologist involves exhibiting initiative and genius through clever and unexpected juxtapositions of cases, while good intellectual workmanship includes the ability to pitch surveys of 'the comparative literature' in such a way as to make a neat space in which one's own case can have a transformative effect (and not just 'fill a gap', as students are relentlessly reminded).

Here too, embarrassment might be a factor. After all, as I noted earlier, anthropology today has explicitly repudiated many of the key principles which made lateral comparison feasible de jure for our predecessors: the notion of comparable 'units', the idea of stable generalizable categories, and the image of the anthropologist of a epistemically privileged operator of comparisons of others' worlds. Much of the discussion of frontal comparison turns precisely on the ways in which it can transcend these limitations – by being dialogical, for instance, or by aiming at the permanent revolution of our conceptual worlds. But this leaves lateral comparison out in the cold. The fact that we nevertheless continue to compare laterally, if we really think about it, should be as embarrassing to contemporary sensibilities as the irreducibly subjective nature of field-based knowledge to an objectivist author of the mid-20th century.

Viveiros de Castro's own well-known work on Amazonian perspectivism stands as an instance of this dynamic. At the heart of this work lies a grand confrontation between Amazonian ontologies and features of 'our own' (Viveiros de Castro 1998, 2004a, 2011). This frontal contrast is the take-home point of much of this work, and also the focus of substantive methodological and conceptual attention, as in the article discussed earlier. Such frontal comparisons are intended to upend 'our' core analytical categories, shake up the discipline's understandings of culture and difference, reinvent anthropology as an exercise in permanent conceptual revolution.

Yet in drawing up this contrast between Euroamerican naturalism and Amazonian multi-naturalism, Viveiros de Castro relies extensively on lateral comparisons between different Amazonian cases, drawing on his own work and on that of others to tease out common patterns in institutions and activities, to reinterpret observed differences, or to draw analogies and continuities across different realms of social practice. Taken together, this lateral comparative work is of a recognisably traditional anthropological kind, and unlike the frontal comparison, these lateral comparisons 'within the region', are presented without much explicit commentary or methodological soul-searching. They are the basic, workaday material from which the substantive argument is built up, and they are not presented as providing either major difficulties or, in themselves, major illumination.

In other words, while Viveiros de Castro's frontal comparisons aim to profoundly challenge and unhinge the very foundations of anthropological knowledge-making, the building-blocks of these frontal comparisons (on the amazonian side at least) are lateral comparisons of the most seemingly traditional anthropological kind. Methodologically speaking, these lateral comparisons rely on and shore up the reassuringly mid-20th century picture of a stable set of comparable 'studies', of distinct social groups within a region; studies produced by a set of participant-observers who are fellows of the same epistemic community; studies describing practices, cosmologies and institutions which can be compared and contrasted in order to establish broader regularities or patterns of difference, testing and modifying hypotheses about such regularities along the way.

IV. A CASE STUDY

In this final section of the paper, I will seek to deepen my characterisation of the persistence and productive nature of lateral comparison in contemporary anthropology, through a close reading of one article which exhibits in an unusually clear form, both the many varieties of lateral moves which anthropologists are wont to make, and the often diverse and rather unelaborated epistemological assumptions which undergird them.

Carlos Fausto's article 'Feasting on People' (2007) represents a bold attempt to think comparatively in a number of different directions at once. Drawing on a range of ethnographies of Amazonian and North american shamanism, Fausto seeks to answer an enduring puzzle: how, in animist contexts in which animals are also persons, can the consumption of prey be distinguished from cannibalism? Fausto notes that one type of answer relies on an image of the hunt as a form of non-violent gift exchange, in which what is being consumed of the animal is not its anthropomorphic soul, but merely its body, freely given to the hunter. Cannibalism is thus avoided.

Fausto argues that this picture, derived mainly from ethnographies of North American animist societies, does not work very well in Amazonian animist societies. Here, he finds a different dynamic, in which persons (be they human or non-human) are composites of active (predator) and passive (prey) parts, which become detached during the act of consumption. Cannibalism consists in the consumption of the active part of the prey. This type of consumption, characteristic for instance of shamanism, is a dangerous vector of mutual transformation, in which the consumer risks being captured by the prey. Culinary consumption, by contrast, requires particular cooking operations to desubjectify the prey in order to ensure that what is consumed are its passive parts. This type of consumption affords the possibility of commensality and the making of kin. As a result of this redefinition of cannibalism, for instance, the act of ritual anthropophagy is no longer an instance of cannibalism, but simply the culinary consumption of a desubjectified body that happens to be human - a particularly intense form of the general pattern in which kinship is remade through commensality.

This argument opens with a frontal comparison, but swiftly moves away from it. In the first paragraph, Fausto notes that ever since Darwin, 'the Western imagination' has been concerned with the way in which meat eating shaped the sociality and personhood of modern humans. The evidence brought to bear for this claim is drawn from the published works of evolutionary anthropologists and archaeologists seeking to tie meat eating to the origins of warfare, social organization, gender relations or sharing. The aim of the piece is then cast against this briefly sketched hinterland:

> In this article I intend to explore this set of images from the perspective of a different tradition of thought, one which developed in the Americas thousands of years before the arrival of modern Europeans and is still very much alive today. This tradition emerged from quite distinct ontological assumptions, leading to different conceptualizations of the relation between predation and food consumption and to different social practices. Amerindian ontologies are not predicated upon the divide between nature and culture (or subject and object) that plays a foundational role in the modern Western tradition. (Fausto 2007 497)

This move has many of the hallmarks outlined above as characteristic of post-plural comparison: evidence for the radical alterity of the West is sought in a set of academic discourses very close to, but not quite overlapping with, those of the anthropologist himself (here, evolutionary anthropology). The contrast is thus, simultaneously, between two 'traditions of thought', and between a body of academic knowledge to which a new and challenging object is confronted.

Treated separately, neither of these moves quite holds up: if the point is to contrast two traditions, then one is bound to feel that the characterisation of the western one by reference to those specific evolutionary assumptions doesn't stand up to much scrutiny. What about all the other ways in which meat-eating and sociality are entangled in the west? Why is this particular contrast chosen? If the point is to use the amazonianist case to challenge the assumptions of a specific body of scholars about the role of meat-eating in evolution, then again, it is not entirely clear how this would work, since the amazonianist material cannot count as evidence by the standards of the literature invoked there. Surely this discussion about the way Amazonians 'understand' predation and social life cannot have the power to challenge the evolutionary literature?

Bundled together, however, these two moves complement and buttress each other. The objection, according to which this material is merely an instance of another cultural perspective which leaves the deep facts of evolution unchallenged, is countered by the move which localizes the evolutionary perspective itself as nothing more than an instance of 'our own imagination'. Conversely, and in the same move, the reality of this difference is brought home. In even thinking of this objection we reveal that we were Western all along.

Note however, that it is I who am reading this neat heuristic form into this first page. Nowhere is such a post-pluralist intent made explicit. One might just as easily read this initial contrast in the standard terms of a pluralist face-off of distinct civilisations à la Evans-Pritchard. Interestingly however, this deeper epistemological question turns out to have rather little bite. Whether plural or post-plural, the effect of this opening frontal salvo on the argument as a whole is neat: this entrée en matière simultaneously sets off the subject matter by contrast, and suspends what might be the standard reflex of some readers at least - that of seeking to find functionalist or evolutionary explanations for Amazonian meat-eating practices.

The main substance of the piece, however, consists of lateral, rather than frontal comparisons. These feature in three different ways in this account, in each case drawing on quite different epistemological assumptions - with little or no explicit acknowledgement. The first is the classic move of building "an abstract model" by drawing on the commonalities of a diverse and carefully chosen sample of ethnographies within the region in which this model is supposed to apply (Óa number of examples taken from all the main language families of Lowland South AmericaÔ Fausto 2007 498). The aim is to outline a set of common "principles" which underlie the "cultural variation" in the area. A "hypothesis" which other ethnographers working in the region will hopefully recognise in their own cases. This is, pace Viveiros de Castro, a fairly straightforward instance of 'controlled comparison' of the kind Eggan would have recognised and probably admired.

Fausto's explicit consideration of the nature and limits of this lateral comparison, is exemplary. The caveats he proposes map the footprint of this kind of controlled comparison as a heuristic: it is of course very abstract, and cannot account for the experiential reality of these practices which only an ethnographically grounded picture can give. The principles it elicits are likely to apply in different ways in different locations. This picture is addressed to and controlled by other ethnographers within the region. It will stand or fall on other ethnographers seeing value in their own cases.

The second type of lateral comparison is with ethnographies of animist societies outside the region. Here, by contrast, the aim is to highlight differences within a broader shared domain:

> "Amazonian ontologies are part of what I would call the Sibero- American shamanic tradition, which has a historical unity of its own. My argument develops from an

internal contrast with the hunter-gatherers of the Subarctic, speakers of Algonqui-
an and Athapaskan languages, who came to represent in its purest form the conver-
sion of hunting into a morally positive relation of giving and sharing. This model is
based on the replacement of predation by the gift." (Fausto 2007 498)

These two types of lateral comparison operate symmetrically in opposite directions to
single out the specificity of Amazonia as an ethnographic area. In this sense these are com-
parisons of the most standardly pluralist kind, pointing to "cultural packages, coherent in-
side and different from what is elsewhere" (Mol 2002).

However, an interesting oscillation creeps into this second move, which was absent
from the first. Here, Fausto raises a doubt over the North American material:
> while in the Subarctic the gift reigns supreme, predation is the more productive
> schema in Amazonia. It is difficult to determine whether this contrast is entirely
> empirical or whether it also results from differences in the approaches adopted by
> researchers in the two regions. (Fausto 2007 500, emphasis added)

The potentially disruptive effect of this uncertainty is swiftly countered and neutralised,
however:
> For our purposes, the contrast with the North American case, be it literal or liter-
> ary, enables us to highlight an aspect which has remained largely unexplored else-
> where and seems to be central in the tropical forest: that predation is a transspecific
> vector of sociality." (Fausto 2007 500)

On the face of it, this lack of concern with the difference between the literal and the lit-
erary sits oddly with the careful empirical grounding of the Amazonian model in the first
type of comparison. Why bother with any of this if the literal and the literary are broadly
interchangeable? It also creates some uncertainty as to what Fausto is doing when he
seems to take issue with particular analyses of North American material, when he proposes
more general redefinitions of concepts such as cannibalism, or claims to be 'moving away
from' classic notions of body-soul dualism in a way which sounds very much like a critique
of the existing state of the art. One of the commentators on the piece calls the author on
this. Fausto's response replays the oscillation:
> "[Vaté] faults me for proposing a different interpretation of one aspect of Bright-
> man's work. Let me make clear that I am not "accusing [him] of misreading his
> own ethnographic material." I merely propose a different interpretation of what
> cannibalism stands for in Amazonia and the boreal forest. In order to do compara-
> tive work, one has to critically address the data of colleagues" (Fausto 2007 521)

But if the aim is merely to propose that things are different in Amazonia, one might im-
agine Vaté replying, then in what sense is this a critical review of a colleague's data, or
even a different interpretation of his work? And if the aim is to identify a regional dynam-
ic, then how can Fausto be simultaneously claiming that he is not in fact interested in the
evidence that there are in fact instances of gift-like dynamics in Amazonia too?

If, in keeping with the general outlook of this paper, we suspend the all or nothing crit-
ical reflex and consider this type of lateral comparison as a heuristic, we would say, not
that this comparison is less empirically grounded or more confused in its aims that Fausto's
intra-regional comparison, but rather that it works to a subtly different effect.

By contrasting a carefully grounded account of Amazonia, to arguments from North
America whose empirical grounding is bracketed, this type of lateral comparison avoids
the difficulty of commenting on the validity of the work of colleagues working in different

contexts. Be they literal or literary, their value is the same: to elicit by contrast a different logic.

This type of lateral comparison sounds rather like the post-plural reinvention of frontal comparison: as we saw above, the key to this recuperation of the frontal was the fact that, literal or literary, the West was once again allowed to play the role of a straw man which can be used to elicit new concepts and possibilities (cf. Strathern 1981). There is one important difference however. In the frontal case, the question of whether the picture of the west is literal or literary doesn't have to be resolved because even the literary is, ultimately, an instance of the literal. Either because (in the political version of the argument) myths of the west are themselves powerful agents which need to be countered; or because (in the epistemological version) the anthropologist's own literary activity, is, minimally, literal evidence of the West at work.

By contrast, when he refuses to decide whether North American-derived accounts of animism are literally true or literary effects of the perspective of their authors, Fausto's argument can rely on no such resolution. The footprint of this type of lateral comparison, in other words, is that it cannot by itself resolve the question of what the broader relevance of its findings is. If the other studies were correct, then the relevance is a region-building one - things are different in Amazonia, and there are crucial differences within the broad category of animism. If the proffered re-definitions of cannibalism and of body/soul dualism in fact manages to 'work' in North America too, then the effect will have been one of theoretical generalisation: a redefinition of animist systems. But crucially, this heuristic itself cannot say which is the case.

In other words, Fausto is making explicit a move which many anthropologists make implicitly - when out of our geographic zone of expertise, we tend to black-box the validity of the works we draw on for comparative insight. Making the move explicit, however, points to its inherent limitation. Then again, this limitation is only a problem if we forget the fact that anthropological studies don't stand on their own. This type of lateral heuristic, characteristically irresolved, is only one move in a broader call and response of regional and conceptual redefinition. The question of whether existing analyses of North American material are correct or convincing cannot be answered by reference to Amazonian material. It will be a matter for North Americanists, in turn, to decide whether this constitutes a critique of their position or not.

There is a third and once again different kind of lateral comparison running through Fausto's argument. This is the use of theoretical models drawn from Marilyn Strathern's work in Melanesia: models of partible persons, of relational agency, and of the transaction of perspectives. These models are found to 'work' in Amazonia, precisely where the North American ones are found not to. In this case, however, the regional derivation of these models is never discussed: the word 'Melanesia' does not even feature in the article. It would be hard, and not a little disingenuous, to read the paper as claiming in any straightforward sense that Amazonians are more like Melanesians than North Americans. Rather, this final kind of lateral comparison brackets such inter-regional concerns altogether just as the second kind of lateral comparison bracketed the empirical validity of the North American work. It does not do so, however in the same way.

Here, we have another classic lateral comparative heuristic, as old as Eggan's 'controlled comparison': the elicitation of similarities between entities whose geographic and cultural distance is so extreme that it enables the author, precisely, to bracket questions of common derivation or relatedness. For classic functionalist authors, such distant analogies acted as the generalising acme of anthropology's comparative craft (Nadel 1951; Radcliffe-Brown 1951): freed of all concerns about common origins, they spoke only of the universal

laws of social functioning. Here, by contrast, distant analogies have been repurposed to a very different effect. Bracketing questions of regionalisation altogether allows a locally-derived concept (Strathern's partible persons) to travel and do local work in a different context without ever having to pay the price of generalization. Nevertheless, this type of lateral comparison is ultimately parasitic upon the more regionally focused kind. It will transport a concept from one place to the next, but cannot carry the weight of characterising that latter place of application.

Fausto's piece is perhaps extreme in the range and variety of lateral comparisons it deploys, and in its explicit focus on region-building. But it acts as a useful reminder of all that is packed into often casual anthropological references to other studies in or beyond 'the region' or on the same 'topic'. Fausto's piece demonstrates, in a zoomed-up version, as it were, the everyday persistence of lateral comparison in contemporary anthropology, the way it weaves the very tissue of our ability to talk to each other, but also the many diverse ways in which the lateral features and the wide epistemic gaps which this diversity contains.

I should stress, again, that my parsing of these three types of lateral comparison as distinct heuristics, is of course, my own. Fausto himself never explicitly adresses how these various moves are to be related, whether they can be considered within the same set of epistemological parameters or what is at stake in combining them. They are all considered, broadly speaking as instances of one type of anthropological activity, namely, comparison. And yet I hope the above makes clear that they map a set of very different heuristics. Some more explicit discussion of their distinctive strengths and characteristic limits, both singly and in their several combinations is a project worth embarking upon, if our aim is to produce robust, convincing and innovative accounts.

CONCLUSION

> "our truth is the intersection of independent lies" (Levins (1966:423), cited in Wimsatt 2007 43)

In the process of bringing the lateral back to the forefront of our epistemological consciousness, the problems of frontality would in turn be transformed. I noted earlier that one might provisionally characterise frontal comparison as the operation which makes the strange familiar and familiar strange, while lateral comparison 'drives the investigation deeper'. Let me return in this conclusion to give these provisional characterisations a slightly more precise outline.

On the face of it, both heuristics work from and with entities which are assumed to be distinct enough to be compared. But in another sense both also work to demonstrate the very fact of this distinctiveness. It is always through comparison that anthropologists have established that there are distinct domains to compare. However, lateral and frontal comparison do this work in different ways and to different effects.

In frontal comparison, a difference is elicited between two domains, one of which includes the perspective doing the eliciting. Hence the characteristic duality of Evans-Pritchard's formulation: the hinterland consists of "the conceptual categories and values of [the anthropologist's] own culture and […] the general body of knowledge of his discipline." In other words, the hinterland is both a domain for comparison to the same extent that the ethnography is ('we have our culture as they have their culture'), and a body of anthropological knowledge confronted to a new empirical reality. While the hinterland can retain the shape of a (perfectible) reading grid in terms of which the ethnography can be understood, this heuristic opens up the more radical possibility that frontal comparison might challenge the very terms in which comparison itself is done. The reading grid, by

definition, is already relativised. This is the key to frontal comparison's inherently polemical streak. Otherwise put, frontal comparison's distinctive payoff lies in its ability to put in jeopardy the very categories of analysis with which the 'object' is approached.

The systematic point of failure of frontal comparison, on the other hand, is that by itself it has little to say about the shape and outline of the entities thus contrasted. It evades that problem by starting from a point of contrast grounded in the anthropologists' own experience. What this contrast is representative of, what broader entity it stands for, is something which frontal comparison enables us to leave unspecified. Otherwise put, the operation requires that we postulate one such entity on either side, bracketing the possibility of multiplicities within.

The shape of frontal comparison in anthropology maps very neatly onto Wimsatt's general account of the surprisingly informative effects of uncertain and conflicting observations, as long you postulate one (and only one) 'object' and one (and only one) 'experimental apparatus':

> Given imperfect observations of a thing-we-know-not-what, using experimental apparatus with biases-we-may-not-understand, we can achieve both a better understanding of the object (it must be, after all, that one thing whose properties can produce these divergent results in these detectors) and of the experimental apparatus (which are, after all, these pieces that can be affected thus divergently by one thing. (Wimsatt 2007 58)

Therefore, the over-generalization of the Other and the tendency to take the same old internal scapegoats as characteristic of the Self are nothing more than the inherent risk this procedure carries in anthropology, its characteristic 'footprint'. This is why the critic who counters that there is more complexity within the hinterland, or that the ethnographic depiction is overly general, or that, in many respects 'they' and 'we' are very much alike - that critic will tend to come across as uninteresting, nitpicking, as missing the point, the spirit of the practice. Indeed, I would argue that anthropologists have managed to recapture the value of frontal comparison in a postplural conceptual atmosphere precisely because frontal comparison was never about, never crucially interested in, such questions of delimitation.

In lateral comparison, by contrast, what is at stake is precisely the traffic of concepts across a landscape made up of entities (societies, institutions, events, etc.) and simultaneously, the division and lumping, the bounding and rebounding of such entities. On the face of it, the lateral procedure might seem less revolutionary. Yet here too, the reading grid is constantly challenged and put at risk, only this time, collectively. Every new case adds to the difficulties of summation, or deflects argument in a different direction. Just as the domains of comparison (regions or thematic units) seemed to sit neatly alongside each other, lateral comparison reveals more difference within, or unexpected connections across them. Just as knowledge seemed to have stabilised, lateral comparison produces new questions, new problems.

Lateral comparison's limit, its point of failure, is its inherent inability to do without some kind of pluralist frame. Taken by itself this is a serious limit and one which has made lateral comparison so hard to recuperate explicitly after the epistemic crisis of the 80s. And yet matched up to frontal comparison, this ceaseless pluralist questioning is a useful irritant. It pushes the point that 'within every people there are other people' (Candea 2011), and counteracts the tendency of frontal comparison to stabilise on the ever-renewed demonstration of the other as a mirror image of "us" (Trouillot 1991).

A final important complementarity: the division and lumping of lateral comparison takes place from a third-party perspective, but this is crucially a collective one: the collec-

tive perspective of anthropologists who are experts in particular regions (such as Amazonia) and themes (such as Animism) talking to each other both within and beyond their areas of specialism. And of course, this procedure simultaneously makes, unmakes and remakes the geographic and thematic 'specialisms' to which these anthropologists belong. Lateral comparisons necessarily come with the caveat of an only temporary stabilisation - they invite more lateral challenge. To quote Wimsatt again

> "Ceteris paribus clauses are nice. They allow us the regularities and modularities we know are there while reminding us of the exceptions – fluctuations or deviations from a macroscopic order that point the way to a deeper understanding. This cognitive form (general pattern + exceptions) and its relatives (broad similarities + attendant differences, models + qualifications, etc.) are deeply anchored in the structure of our case-based organisation of knowledge: "This is like that (which you already know) but with the following differences." It wears the micro-structure of cumulative learning on its face." (Wimsatt 2007 33)

By contrast, in the final analysis, frontal comparison, by itself, is an individual experimental procedure, a 'personal equation' (Kuklick 2011): the account of a transformation operated by an anthropologist's experience of otherness, upon that anthropologist's consciousness of the familiar. Through appeals to a hinterland, frontal comparison calls in its readership into a perspectival 'we' (Pina Cabral 2006 667) whose form remains shaky and disputable: the hinterland is always simultaneously a shared 'us' and a position which the anthropologist herself is leaving behind in the very moment of articulating it.

The two heuristics cannot do without each other. Their failures as much as their strengths complement and support each other. Frontal comparison relies on lateral comparisons for its broader points of extension; by lateral comparisons it travels, is limited and judged. Lateral comparison begins and ends with frontal challenges to its ever reimagined framing devices. In frontal comparison we put ourselves to the test. In lateral comparison we put each other to the test. The two moves are mutually constitutive. Their dance is the dance of anthropological knowledge. But while we have an increasingly explicit arsenal for thinking about the power, promises and limits of frontal comparison, the explicit epistemological work of 're-engineering' lateral comparison, on the other hand, has only just begun (Descola 2005; Strathern 2011, 2012).

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