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## Comparison against theory, context without concept

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BOOK SYMPOSIUM

## Comparison against theory, context without concept

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Comment on van der Veer, Peter. 2016. *The value of comparison*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

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From 2006, Peter van de Veer was the external examiner for three years on a new Master's degree course that I had designed and now taught, called "China in Comparative Perspective." He was ideally and rarely qualified because he had begun his studies of China, had two books out on religious nationalism based on fieldwork in India, and had chapters and edited books on religion and nationalism in Britain as well as in India. The course, like his book, is an open challenge to every centrism, Euro, Sino, Indo, American. It challenges every exceptionalism. The course is organized around topical themes that are theorized in more than one way and stand as a preparation to modify the theories and concepts introduced, and to use the modified analytical concepts in thinking about and presenting Chinese realities. (A book closely based on the course, written by Hans Steinmuller and me, has been published this year by World Scientific Press).

*The value of comparison* (2016) is also organized around themes, one per chapter: money and market, the Muslim as stranger, iconoclasm and the after images of what it destroys, the Southeast Asian mountain massif between India and China, and care and the alleviation (or not) of poverty. Every one of these chapter topics are of course theorized, and the theories challenged by each other, but the comparisons that engage Peter van der Veer are quite specifically not about theory. Indeed the book is notably against theory, where theory is an attempt to generalize. It is not even about the use of comparison for the development of analytic concepts able to account for the differences that comparisons lay bare. The drive is rather to refute any generalization and to challenge any concept, be it of nation-states or of religious ritual, although it is impossible not to refer and use such concepts before



and while knocking them. And the comparisons do produce some hard-hitting points, such as a reminder of the importance of caste (or rather outcaste-ing) in the perpetuation of poverty in India, compared with China.

Comparison is the forte of anthropology. Immersion in another world is always a challenge to one's own assumptions about the world. Anthropologists study what Peter van der Veer calls "fragments" and set them in contexts, which are their conceptual universes, to which and in which they are linked, which is not necessarily a bordered society or culture but is a holism that must be explored. Comparison and the necessity of translation between such contextualized fragments is what his book celebrates. The theory against which most of the book rails is that of human mentality, in particular the intentionality involved in the calculation of interest and decisions (rational choice theory) and in human cognition (including theory of mind, the human capacity of seeing the intentionality in interaction from an outside, third position). Thus, in the chapter on money and markets his target is rational choice theory, against which he wields what is by now extremely well established and widely accepted (for instance in behavioral economics), that passion and luck and the calculation of fate are as much involved in financial and other transactions as reason. He doesn't even mention Maurice Bloch and Jonathon Parry's development of the analytic concept of the temporality of exchange and morality in their introduction to *Money and the Morality of Exchange* (1989). What he raises instead is the question of what is the appropriate context, the whole, in which to set a local study and its comparison; it is not necessarily the fact that there is a global system of finance, although relevant in its local effects. That is an excellent question to raise, but surely it is at the same time a question of conceptual adequacy, by which I mean the necessity to have a concept not just of various types of exchange as differentiated by their transactors but also of various temporalities and scales of exchange. For instance the longer-term temporality may require a smaller spatial scale. In other words, there is an etic field or context for the analysis of money and markets.

Among etic fields, one that most interests me and Peter van der Veer is that of religious ritual. For example, among the various analytic concepts of religious ritual that he could have considered are those offered by a China scholar and a comparer of thoroughness and breadth equal to Peter van der Veer's, Catherine Bell. But she is never mentioned in this book (see her *Ritual theory, ritual practice* [1992] and *Ritual: Perspectives and dimensions* [1997]). Both scholars are interested in the politics of ritual performance, she with conflicts over its meaning and conduct and its capacity to legitimate as well temporarily to contain conflictual understandings, he much more with religiosity and the iconography and spirituality of political nationality. His previous book, *The modern spirit of Asia* (2014), produced an historical theory, summarized on page eighty-one of this book, the emergence at the end of the nineteenth century of a "syntagmatic chain of religious-secular-spiritual-magical" in which the distinctions between the four terms are interdependent and that modern states variously reproduce. In *this* book, however, his concern, running through several chapters, is not to distinguish but to question what is religious. Thus, the magical, the virtual, the metaphysical, and the invisibly present could all be "religious" or syntagmatically calling each other's existence. But it is never clear whether he is comparing or whether they are analogies of each other. They are all

to be added to the fact that the religious has not been surpassed and indeed has continued (India) or been revived (China) and underlies (Europe) or underscores (United States, the Netherlands) the secular.

On secularity he misses a trick in his account of municipal planning in China. Planning is well introduced as a utopian project, but then instead of paying attention to the ideals of modernity always inadequately manifest in the new constructions of urban utopias of spectacle or of desirable living and working spaces, such as the financial and administrative districts or housing estates or industrial parks, he looks only at the obstinate memories of destroyed religious buildings and the continuation of the lunar year and fate calculation. Would the secular utopias of city planning not have to be distinguished from other kinds of sacrality? He is not bothered by such a question, avoiding it in favor of an occluded acceptance that there is something else, undoubtedly religious, being destroyed, preserved, and revived. In other words, he does not use this book to develop his historical theory.

A major theme of the book, also without elaborating it as theory or concept, is the importance of Christian imperialism and nation-state formation forced upon other conceptual worlds in India, Southeast Asia, and China. Here too he seems to me to miss a trick, this time by not being thorough enough in his reading. He accepts (2016: 117) the contention of Francis Hsu, one of the remarkable bunch of Chinese anthropologists who were at the LSE with Raymond Firth and Bronislaw Malinowski, that only Christian and Muslim missionaries promoted their world view, not the Chinese, although its empire grew and its civilization spread. Hsu had made a wartime study of the highly assimilated Bai in the southwest of China, where he and so much of the Chinese intelligentsia and the Nationalist government had been pushed by the Japanese occupation. Backing Hsu, Peter van der Veer claims that even if before Chinese expansion into the area the population spoke another language and had another conceptual world this is irrelevant to the fact that they are now Chinese in their kinship organization, which in a rather old-fashioned and imprecise way Hsu and van der Veer call “clans.” Because Hsu is Chinese, an insider, van der Veer (2016: 117–20) champions him against the anthropologist of far greater analytic precision on asymmetrical lineage organization, family, and marriage in China, Maurice Freedman. Possibly the fact that Freedman did not read Chinese well is held against him, just as van der Veer holds against Edmund Leach that he might (a presumption) not have mastered the subtleties of Kachin language and dialects. Hsu had not read and nor has van der Veer the publication—after several years of fieldwork in the same Bai area—by C. P. Fitzgerald, *The tower of five glories* ([1941] 2005), which details differences of spoken language between the Bai (then called Min-chia by Han Chinese) and Mandarin and rituals that open to a conceptual world quite distinct from that of neighboring Han Chinese ancestors, gods, and mountains. What could have intrigued van der Veer is the comparison between the means or the conduct of the spread of civilizations or religions, of course noting the force of arms accompanying Christians but not Arabs, rather than dismissing the fact of the spread and mixture of civilizations in this border region, already noted by Edmund Leach. A reconceptualization of civilization, empire, and civilizational mission could have been the issue. The different contexts of and kinds of violence used to establish hierarchy, including Yi slave-raiding, Chinese and Mongol garrisoning, as well as European Christian civilizing

are mentioned but not brought together in what might have been suggestive of a comparative concept.

If you agree with Peter van der Veer (and with Michael Herzfeld on the back cover) that the social sciences have, with the end of area studies, reverted to hidden Eurocentric assumptions about what is humanly universal and that debunking them should be our priority, then you will not be disappointed. But I'm not sure this is the situation and I still think anthropological and other social scientific comparison does and should continue to improve our conceptual apparatus.

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