

]bref[CANDEA, MATEI. *Comparison in anthropology: the impossible method*. xiv, 392 pp., figs, bibliogr. Cambridge: Univ. Press, 2018. £24.99 (paper)

]rp[This is a big (by the standards of the series in which it appears), serious, and sophisticated book. Clearly written and with a series of intriguing (though not always easy to interpret) diagrams, it tackles head on what many have seen as the *raison d'être* of anthropology. One might well go further and say that comparison as a cognitive process is fundamental to all thought and language, though the author sticks strictly to his self-imposed task of analysing comparison within (social) anthropology. The book's subtitle is drawn from a remark attributed by Rodney Needham to Evans-Pritchard: 'There's only one method in social anthropology, the comparative method – and that's impossible'.

]rp1[*Comparison in anthropology* provides a map of the terrain and offers a vocabulary for talking about the many decision points that have to be confronted by anyone seeking self-awareness about the comparisons that are necessarily there, explicit or not, in any ethnographic and anthropological work. Matei Candea introduces new terms to describe characteristic anthropological moves, such as 'the pinch of salt' argument, 'the sideswipe' (dismissing all previous work), the distinction between frontal (comparing self and other) and lateral (lining up a number of similar cases) comparison, and heuristic versus caesurist approaches to the discipline's history. His coinages are likely to be cited frequently in future anthropological discussion.

]rp1[Candea was drawn to the subject by his post-doctoral fieldwork on primatologists. He was struck by the difference between them and anthropologists. As a friend remarked, behavioural anthropologists have many species and one theory, whereas social anthropologists have one species and many theories. As a consequence, anthropologists often seem mired 'in a stultifying inexplicitness about what it [is] our various devices [are] even trying to do' (p. 21). Candea's ambition is to explicate the topic by

carrying out a kind of textual ethnography of what anthropologists have tried to do or tried to recommend when thinking about comparison.

]rp1[It is a strength of the book that Candea refrains from adopting what he dubs the popular ‘caesurist’ move, which condemns with a ‘sideswipe’ everything written before a certain point. On the contrary, he shows how many of the positions taken up today were already staked out in the nineteenth and early twentieth century by J.S. Mill, Durkheim, Boas, and others. This attention to the history of the discipline, the author’s careful representation of the views he writes about, and his refusal to go to any extreme in coming to his conclusions are all very welcome.

]rp1[However, *Comparison in anthropology* focuses so exclusively on anthropology (and social anthropology at that) that it could be said to have unconsciously essentialized the discipline. Mills’s method of concomitant variation is discussed without any allusion to the fact that the method is alive and well in the complex statistical manipulations carried out by quantitative social scientists, who, often enough, are housed just down the hallway from anthropologists. Furthermore, many anthropologists are involved in collaborations or dialogue with just such social scientists, often indeed seeking to compare different subgroups within given populations.

]rp1[This reviewer was frustrated to find – despite so much space devoted to the dissection of what anthropologists have said about comparison – virtually no actual ethnographic comparisons. Examples of successful, partially successful, or wholly unsuccessful comparisons worked through in detail are conspicuous by their absence. A few are mentioned but discussion remains on a very abstract level. If this is the ethnography of anthropology, it is not thick description. What about the comparison of Protestantism (or, more broadly, Abrahamic faiths) with other religions, of African cuisine or kinship patterns with those found in Eurasia, of contrasting notions of personhood in Melanesia, Latin

America, and Euro-America, of different patterns of marriage and cattle exchange in southern Africa, of the contrast between Chinese and South Asian conceptions of secularism, or of the entangled plots of Kurosawa films and spaghetti westerns – to choose a few random examples?

rp1[If Candea had worked through selected examples in terms of his distinctions, the reader would have had a much firmer grasp on where he really stands on the question of comparison. He declares that, against much of the current tone in the discipline and against his own subtitle, he does believe comparison is possible. I wonder. Undergraduates are likely to struggle with the abstractness and subtlety of his arguments, which presuppose a good understanding of the history of the subject, but advanced students should relish thinking through their own ethnographic material in terms of his numerous concepts and insights.

rau[DAVID N. GELLNER

*University of Oxford*