

## « The fieldworks of comparison »

Issue co-edited by:

**Anne-Charlotte Millepied** (EHESS, Iris & Université de Genève, Institut des Études du Genre)

**Simon Ridley** (Université Paris Nanterre, Sophiapol)

and **Paolo Stuppia** (Université Paris 1 Panthéon Sorbonne, CESSP).

Deadline for abstracts: **September 10<sup>th</sup>, 2019**

### Presentation of the journal

Terrains/Théories is a multidisciplinary peer reviewed social sciences Journal articulating conceptualization and empirical research. It aims to create a crossroads between sociology, anthropology and philosophy. It assumes that political philosophy – in the broadest sense – must today transcend a purely conceptual approach to politics by approaching social sciences, while it is becoming increasingly important for the latter to clarify theoretical choices that can guide research practices and field surveys.

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### Presentation of the special issue

Often presented as the "essence" of social science research, comparison has never ceased to animate academic discussions. In the French- and English-speaking worlds, it remains a subject of relevance<sup>1</sup>. Either the condition for the scientific approach<sup>2</sup>, or an "impossible" method<sup>3</sup>, comparison raises methodological, epistemological and even political debates: is it possible to generate one or more theories from the confrontation of different fieldworks? Is the purpose of comparison nomothetic? Is comparison a guarantee of scientificity?

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<sup>1</sup> See, for instance, Cécile Vigour's synthesis (VIGOUR Cécile, *La comparaison dans les sciences sociales. Pratiques et méthodes*, Paris, La Découverte, 2005) ; an issue of the journal *Terrains & Travaux* in 2012 (DE VERDALLE Laure, VIGOUR Cécile and LE BIANIC Thomas (dir.), *Terrains et Travaux*, n° 21, vol. 2 « Ce que comparer veut dire », 2012) ; the Cerisy seminar in 2013 « Métaphysiques comparées : la philosophie à l'épreuve de l'anthropologie », that lead to a publication in 2017 (CHARBONNIER Pierre, SALMON Gildas and SKAFISH Peter (dir.), *Comparative Metaphysics: Ontology after Anthropology*, London, Rowman & Littlefield, 2017) ; a seminar at the University of Cambridge in 2014-2015 (« The History of Cross-Cultural Comparatism ») : <http://www.crassh.cam.ac.uk/programmes/the-history-of-cross-cultural-comparatism> ; Philippe Descola's course at the Collège de France in 2018-2019, titled « Qu'est-ce que comparer ? » (<https://www.college-de-france.fr/site/philippe-descola/course-2018-2019.htm>), and three articles in the latest issue of *L'Homme* under the section "Comparatismes en question".

<sup>2</sup> For Émile Durkheim, amongst others.

<sup>3</sup> CANDEA Matei, *Comparison in Anthropology: The Impossible Method*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2018.

Questioning comparison implies questioning the founding program of the social sciences disciplines.

For the positivist sociology of Émile Durkheim, comparing is the only means available to demonstrate that a phenomenon is the cause of another. Making comparison the method necessary for the production of evidence, Durkheim puts it at the basis of the sociological approach and affirms: "comparative sociology is not a particular branch of sociology; it is sociology itself, as it ceases to be purely descriptive and aspires to report the facts"<sup>4</sup>. Meanwhile, Max Weber builds a comparative historical sociology<sup>5</sup> that aims to examine in a diachronic and synchronic manner different social strata, paving the way for the sociological study of culture, its ruptures and its continuities. Influencing the political research agenda, this has resulted in the elaboration of several well-known comparisons, such as the sociology of voter turnout, partisan systems or the social-movement repertoire of collective action. In political science, comparison has become the analytical tool *par excellence* and as such has become the subject of extensive standardization, particularly in the form of "comparatism" or the "comparative method"<sup>6</sup> ; it also gave rise to the "comparative policy" branch<sup>7</sup>. Comparison is also at the heart of anthropology since the 19th century, whose project to confront human societies around the world was primarily structured by the opposition "us/them".

While the method has undergone significant transformations within this discipline, from armchair anthropologists to Structuralists, to the field anthropologists of the early 20th century, as well as much criticism, it has continued to be considered as the "only method in Anthropology"<sup>8</sup> and to be the subject of "unshakable faith"<sup>9</sup>, at least until the end of the 1980s. In history, historiography agrees that Marc Bloch's call to a "comparative history of European societies"<sup>10</sup> was not followed by a renewal in the 1970s and 1980s<sup>11</sup>. Since then, the discipline has been punctuated by calls to comparatism<sup>12</sup>.

What is left of these initial projects in the age of interdisciplinarity and of the postmodern criticism that took root in anthropology<sup>13</sup>? Perhaps more than any other science, the latter has set up a reflexive program to free itself from its imperialist and ethnocentric bias. Transforming theory into a practice of cultural criticism<sup>14</sup> has resulted in the creation of an ethos of *decentrement*, an "art of shifting the gaze reflected back to the self"<sup>15</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> DURKHEIM Emile, *Les règles de la méthode sociologique* (1895), Paris, PUF, 1986, p. 137.

<sup>5</sup> KALBERG Stephen, *Max Weber's comparative-historical sociology*, Oxford, Polity Press, 1994.

<sup>6</sup> LIJPHART Arend, "Comparative Politics and the Comparative Method", *The American Political Science Review*, vol. 65, n° 3, 1971, p. 682-693 ; COLLIER David, "The comparative method", in FINIFTER Ada W. (dir.), *Political Science: The State of the Discipline II*, Washington DC, American Political Science Association, 1993, p. 105-119.

<sup>7</sup> See for instance the *International Journal of Comparative Public Policy*. And many other journals that take the international comparative approach.

<sup>8</sup> Evans-Pritchard declared: "There's only one method in social anthropology, the comparative method – and that's impossible", in NEEDHAM Rodney, "Polythetic Classification: Convergence and Consequences", *Man*, vol. 10, n° 3, 1975, p. 365.

<sup>9</sup> LEBNER Ashley, « La redescription de l'anthropologie selon Marilyn Strathern », *L'Homme*, vol. 218, n° 2, 2016, p. 117-149.

<sup>10</sup> BLOCH Marc, « Pour une histoire comparée des sociétés occidentales », *Revue de synthèse historique*, décembre 1928, p. 15-50.

<sup>11</sup> KAEUBLE Hartmut, « La recherche européenne en histoire sociale comparative (XIXe-XXe siècle) », *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, vol. 106-107, 1995, p. 67-79.

<sup>12</sup> KOTT Sandrine et NADAU Thierry, « Pour une pratique de l'histoire sociale comparative. La France et l'Allemagne contemporaines », *Genèses*, n° 17, 1994, p. 103-111 ; DÉTIENNE Marcel, *Comparer l'incomparable*, Paris, Seuil, 2000.

<sup>13</sup> CLIFFORD James et MARCUS George, *Writing Culture. The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1986.

<sup>14</sup> MARCUS George E. et FISCHER Michael M. J., *Anthropology as Cultural Critique: An Experimental Moment in the Human Sciences*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1986.

<sup>15</sup> RAULIN Anne, *Les traces psychiques de la domination. Essai sur Kardiner*, Lormont, Le Bord de l'eau, 2016, p. 175.

In the world system, every ethnography has a multisited dimension<sup>16</sup>. It is within this framework that comparison as a methodological and analytical posture must be systematically rethought, such as Matei Candea's approach<sup>17</sup> that offers a critique of frontal comparison (which implies asymmetry) and a revaluation of the lateral comparison, which can help to open areas of mixing, intermediate situations and dialogical reciprocity within the Western area itself<sup>18</sup>. From the perspective of historical research, the *histoire croisée*<sup>19</sup> also represents a shift towards the classic comparative approach and a call for more reflexivity.

Marilyn Strathern has led a thorough critique of comparison, which would reproduce the Western conception of "society" and "the individual" and thus a certain scientific ethnocentrism. She proposes to broaden the scope of comparison by advocating a practice of analogy<sup>20</sup>. What is it to compare, if societies are no longer understood as homogeneous units<sup>21</sup> ? Looking at things from a different angle to interrogate comparison is even more interesting today at the time of a « global turn in social sciences »<sup>22</sup> and of what may be a confusing disciplinary fragmentation, as both the units and objectives of comparison are shifting.

Is comparison still the quintessential tool of sociology, anthropology or political science to theorize, when different studies (cultural studies, science and technology studies, gender studies, etc.) make interdisciplinary comparison itself a scientific project? How may we take notice of the many criticisms addressed to this method? How can we imagine more reflexive theories and practices of comparison?

It is therefore to the adoption of a reflexive stance that we invite the contributors to this issue. The goal here is not to question the singularity of the comparative method but rather the multiplicity of practices of comparison in social sciences, both its implicit and explicit uses, as well as its contributions and its limits.

More specifically, we wish to question the theories of comparison from the point of view of empirical practices, and thus reconnect with a classical question held dear to the journal *Terrains/Theories*: How does fieldwork question theory? How may we think comparison from comparisons? We call for articles that are situated in concrete research practices, irrespective of the form taken by the "fieldwork" according to the disciplinary anchorages (interviews, ethnography, archives, discourse, text corpuses, visual corpuses, etc.). Indeed, this issue is resolutely multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary, in order to encourage a more general reflection on what interdisciplinarity does to comparison, and vice versa.

To think of the scales and the fields of comparison, the proposals can be inspired by the following axis:

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<sup>16</sup> MARCUS George E., « Ethnography In/Of the World System: The Emergence of Multisited Ethnography », *Annual Review of Anthropology*, vol. 24, 1995, p. 95-117.

<sup>17</sup> CANDEA Matei, « De deux modalités de comparaison en anthropologie sociale », *L'Homme*, vol. 218, 2016, p. 183-218.

<sup>18</sup> RAULIN Anne et ROGERS Susan Carol (dir.), *Parallaxes transatlantiques. Vers une anthropologie réciproque*, Paris/New York, CNRS éditions/Berghahn Press, 2012/2015.

<sup>19</sup> WERNER Michael, ZIMMERMANN Bénédicte, « Histoire Croisée: Between the Empirical and Reflexivity », *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales*, n° 58, vol. 1, 2003, p. 7-36.

<sup>20</sup> STRATHERN Marilyn, *Partial Connections* (1994), Walnut Creek, Altamira Press, 2001 ; LEBNER Ashley, « La redescription de l'anthropologie selon Marilyn Strathern », *L'Homme*, vol. 218, n° 2, 2016, p. 117-149.

<sup>21</sup> INGOLD Tim (dir.), *Key Debates in Anthropology*, London, Routledge, 1996.

<sup>22</sup> CAILLÉ Alain et DUFOIX Stéphane (dir.), *Le tournant global des sciences sociales*, Paris, La Découverte, 2013.

## **Axis 1: Historicizing and contextualizing comparative cultures of sciences**

- Humanities and social sciences

From a perspective of history of the humanities and of social sciences, articles may focus on a study of theories and practices of comparison with specific authors in mind, in a school of thought, or in various historical or geographical contexts.

- Hard sciences and natural sciences

Is comparison the prerogative of the humanities and social sciences? How do we compare in mathematics, medicine, chemistry, physics, biology? Research in science and technology studies would be welcome here. Whether we think of comparative anatomy or naturalism of the 19th century<sup>23</sup>, it would be interesting to put the comparative practices of the humanities and social sciences in perspective.

## **Axis 2: Comparison practices**

We invite articles based on ongoing or completed empirical research, with a reflexive return on the method of comparison in action. The different stages of the research can be questioned: in its conception; on the field; during the analysis; during writing.

- Investigation

Was the comparison thought of from the beginning? How do you build a comparative research? Does it involve specific investigative methods, ways of conducting interviews or making ethnographic observations for example?

- Analysis

We wish to draw attention to the more banal dimensions of comparison and its continued presence in social science knowledge operations. It is also on this "constant comparison" at all levels of the analysis that one can ponder. In developing grounded theory, Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss thus based the legitimacy of qualitative methods and their ability to generate theory from the continuous comparison of harvested data<sup>24</sup>. We can also question the differentiated contributions of qualitative and quantitative methods to the practice of comparison.

- Writing

It may be postulated that comparison challenges writing, which is often left out of methodological reflections, as already pointed out by Émilie Courtin, Bleuwenn Lechaux, Elise Roullaud and Marianne Woollven in the introduction to an issue of *International review of comparative public policy* devoted to the writing of the comparison<sup>25</sup>.

- Units of comparison

Is it the same method when comparing individuals, families, hospital services, religions, States or cultural areas? To what extent do the size and number of units of comparison affect the research and analysis method? How may we coordinate together several comparative

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<sup>23</sup> Hocquet Thierry, « Logique de la comparaison et physique de la génération chez Buffon », *Dix-huitième siècle*, vol. 39, n° 1, 2007, p. 595-612.

<sup>24</sup> GLASER Barney et STRAUSS Anselm, *The discovery of grounded theory. Strategies for qualitative research*, Chicago, Aldine, 1967.

<sup>25</sup> COURTIN Émilie, LECHAUX Bleuwenn, ROULLAUD Élise et WOOLLVEN Marianne, « Démêler les fils du récit comparatif », *Revue internationale de politique comparée*, vol. 19, n° 1, 2012, p. 7-17 ;

perspectives, for example when a comparison is conducted both in a diachronic and synchronic fashion<sup>26</sup>?

### **Axis 3: Epistemological issues of comparison**

- Interweavings

Does comparison tend to isolate, singularize the units of analysis, and thus prevent the study of the joints, intersections, interlinkages of the phenomena studied? Can the comparative method be adapted to an intersectional approach of social relationships? We can refer to the works of Colette Guillaumin<sup>27</sup> on the joint analysis of social relationships of race and sex. If she does not directly thematize this, her approach is more on the side of the analogy than on that of comparison<sup>28</sup>.

- Critics by feminist epistemology

It seems essential for this issue to question the objectives and assumptions of comparison. Critical epistemologies, especially feminist<sup>29</sup>, have particularly reflected on the conditions of the production of knowledge that question the character of scientific viewpoints and criticize the claims to neutral objectivity borne by positivist science. It is the latter that has often been linked to the comparative method in its systematic and standardized dimension, but it has also been rethought, for example in political science, as to make it a critical practice<sup>30</sup>. One can also imagine a practice of comparison oriented towards widening of viewpoints accounting for minority perspectives or those considered less legitimate, in accordance with the political project of feminist and intersectional epistemologies.

- *The transversal emergence of studies and the boundaries of comparison*

Various studies From the Anglo-American world, in the field of ethnicity, gender, media, (post)colonial, research etc., are spreading increasingly in universities and global academic networks. Can the success of these projects, most often supported by comparison between more or less distant disciplines, be made explicit? What epistemological and methodological transformations do they entail? It is less a matter of discussing the contributions of pluridisciplinarity itself than understanding how this approach, applied to specific areas, calls into question several traditional comparative boundaries.

Contributions to this axis would benefit from being developed from empirical research. If they are divided into two axes here, we consider methodology and epistemology as intertwined.

The issue is coedited by Anne-Charlotte Millepied (PhD candidate in sociology at the EHESS/Iris and at Geneva University/Institut des Etudes Genre), Simon Ridley (doctor in sociology at the University Paris Nanterre, Sophiapol) and Paolo Stuppia (doctor in political science at the University Paris 1 Panthéon Sorbonne, CESSP).

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<sup>26</sup> RIDLEY Simon, *Les sens de la liberté d'expression : socio-anthropologie comparative des campus de Berkeley et de Nanterre*, thèse en sociologie sous la direction d'Anne Raulin, Université Paris Nanterre, 2019.

<sup>27</sup> GUILLAUMIN Colette, *Sexe, race et pratique du pouvoir. L'idée de nature*, Paris, Côté-Femme, 1992.

<sup>28</sup> NAUDIER Delphine et SORIANO Éric, « Colette Guillaumin. La race, le sexe et les vertus de l'analogie », *Cahiers du Genre*, vol. 48, n° 1, 2010, p. 193-214.

<sup>29</sup> HARDING Sandra, « Rethinking Standpoint Epistemology: What is "Strong Objectivity"? », in ALCOFF Linda et POTTER Elizabeth (dir.), *Feminist Epistemologies*, New York, Routledge, 1993, p. 49-82.

<sup>30</sup> SPIERINGS Niels, « Introduction: Gender and Comparative Methods », *Politics & Gender*, n° 12, 2016, p. 1-5.

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## **Submission Process**

The deadline for proposals submission is **September 10, 2019**. They should be sent to the coeditors of the issue: **Anne-Charlotte Millepied** ([annecharlotte.millepied@yahoo.fr](mailto:annecharlotte.millepied@yahoo.fr)), **Simon Ridley** ([simon.ridley@hotmail.fr](mailto:simon.ridley@hotmail.fr)) and **Paolo Stuppia** ([paolo.stuppia@yahoo.fr](mailto:paolo.stuppia@yahoo.fr)).

Proposals should present:

- a title;
- an abstract of approximately 5000 characters;
- Author(s) data such as complete name, institution, function, professional address, phone number and e-mail address.

The editorial board will proceed to selection and inform the authors of the selected proposals by **October 15<sup>th</sup>, 2019**. The authors are kindly requested to respect the editorial guidelines of the journal that can be found online (<https://teth.revues.org/501>).

The articles expected are of a format of 45 000 to 60 000 signs (spaces, notes and bibliography included) and must be submitted no later than **February 29<sup>th</sup>, 2020** for a publication number in **September 2020**.

The items will receive a double-blind evaluation.

For all further information, please contact the publishing Secretariat: [antoine.dauphragne@parisnanterre.fr](mailto:antoine.dauphragne@parisnanterre.fr)