Franz Krause

HOW CAN WE (NOT) COMPARE WITH CULTURAL RELATIVISM?

The excellent contributions to this blog have demonstrated beyond doubt how relevant and indeed necessary cultural relativism is, not only for contemporary anthropological research, but also for countering recent xenophobic, racist and populist trends in European politics and practices. I see the preceding posts as a great resource with potentials for undergraduate teaching and non-specialist engagement, and I have – quite frankly – little of substance to add to them.

All I can do is point to some implications of cultural relativism for another key, and often contested, tool in anthropological research: comparison. Quite frequently, the two are seen as polar opposites in our academic endeavours: either we retain cultural relativism, explaining observed phenomena solely by reference to their particular context, or we compare these phenomena, using universalist, or at least supra-contextual, standards.

This opposition is well articulated in Chris Hann's contribution. Hann also makes clear, however, that even his teacher Jack Goody who saw anthropology as "comparative sociology" emphasised the importance of first understanding "the native point of view". Correspondingly, Clifford Geertz, who figures as the epitome of relativist anthropology in Hann's account, has published explicit comparisons of the places that he knew best through in-depth fieldwork, Indonesia and Morocco. One such study explores why the same religion, Islam, means fundamentally different things in these two countries; another one compares irrigation in Morocco and Bali. In the latter, Geertz argues that "[a]ny long-established adaptive regime considered only in itself tends to take on the look of not only inevitability but also optimality" while comparison "restores the sense that things could quite easily be otherwise

than they are, which is not the same as saying that they could be anything at all."

Relativism and comparison might not be polar opposites after all. Moreover, even the most comparative of anthropologists would mirror what many contributors to this blog (e.g. Brandtstädter; Borneman; Girke; Reinhardt) have pointed out about cultural relativism, namely, that we must not confuse the moral and the methodic. Embracing cultural relativism as a method for understanding different lifeworlds does not imply that we equally approve of everything we find out. Similarly, when we compare these lifeworlds, we hope to learn something from their juxtaposition, but do not set out to measure them against a pre-defined ethical scale.

And comparing is what we, as anthropologists, do all the time implicitly or explicitly, as Richard Fox and Andre Gingrich have illustrated. This happens even in times when formal comparison is distinctly out of fashion. In fact, the very need for – and power of – cultural relativism derives from the ubiquitous comparing that we do between what we know and deem normal, and what we encounter in other places and among other people. Were we to compare everything we encounter directly to our own standards, we would never be able to make sense of the lives of others; but were we not to compare it with our own experiences, we would be unable to relate to them at all. Cultural relativism thus acts not as opposite, but as necessary counterpart to cultural comparison.

Most of the discussion on this blog has been concerned with relativism in relation to this kind of comparison, between "us" and "them" – but this is not the only kind of comparison anthropologists engage in, and not the only kind that benefits a lot from cultural relativism. Matei Candea has usefully distinguished what he calls "lateral" and "frontal" forms of comparison in anthropology. "Frontal" comparison is the kind between a supposedly unfamiliar other and the putatively known background of the researcher.

Franz Krause

Anthropologists have severely criticized this kind of comparison, but it has also been revived as a key tool of cultural critique (e.g. Girke) and a central tenet of the ontological turn (e.g. Brandtstädter). On the other hand, "lateral" comparison is the kind between different ethnographic studies, where the focus is not how the other relates to the self, but how the variety of human lifeworlds can enrich our understanding of life on earth.

Lateral comparison is often associated with the most non-culturally-relativist approaches, modelled on the positivist and universalist techniques of the natural sciences. An epitome of this are perhaps the so-called Human Relation Area Files (HRAF), a database of hundreds of "cultures", sub-divided into myriad traits that can be analysed statistically. Here, these traits stand on their own, bereft of the context that cultural relativism rightly claims to be so central for understanding. Studies using this database can make rather authoritative statements – a recent one being that the romantic kiss features only in 46% of human cultures, and is thus far from a human universal. But their contribution to understanding – rather than cataloguing – the diversity of human lifeworlds remains unclear.

Indeed, the division of the world into distinct cultures – a prerequisite for comparison modelled on the natural sciences – is dubious at best, and often dangerous. Many contributors to this blog have noted this in relation to cultural relativism, but again, this speaks to comparison too: we live in a world that does not come in clearly distinct and impenetrable chunks – like separate cultures – but that is made up of borrowings, influences, commonalities and resistances. Any cultural context we might find is characterised as much by such overarching connections as by infinitely proliferating internal differentiations, as Bernhard Streck has indicated, that it becomes impossible to delineate borders that are not plainly of the researcher's making. Yes, people are situated differently in fields of various traditions, economies, regimes of rule, gender roles, kinship obligations, religious

communities, aesthetic preferences, ecological affordances, the list goes on. But these fields overlap, and some larger processes like colonialism or neoliberal world markets have become part – even though in rather different ways – of the lifeworlds of many people in rather different contexts.

So if we cannot clearly distinguish different "cultures" in the world – how can we compare at all? The key to this question might be that in spite of the unbounded nature of human lifeworlds, they remain very different, not only in various places around the globe, but also in geographical proximity. For anthropological research, this requires a balancing act between "othering" (assuming or producing an insurmountable difference between us and the people we study) and "saming" (pretending that humans everywhere are alike). When we conduct lateral comparisons keeping this in mind, we can shift the focus from opposing an assumed "us" to a supposed "them", to a juxtaposition of various "thems" that still tell us a lot about "us".

Of course, these "thems" cannot be "cultures" as bounded wholes, but our cases must be delineated differently. Kirsten Hastrup, for instance, proposes a comparison of what she calls "climate worlds, i.e. lived social spaces as sites of theorising climate in their own right". Suggesting that climate is "cosmopolitan" and therefore a field of both similarity and differences, she finds that differently situated ways of understanding and dealing with climate change are valuable and insightful cases for comparing e.g. Arctic hunters, Pacific islanders, Andean farmers and African pastoralists.

Cultural relativism enters this kind of comparison in multiple ways: in the delineation of meaningful cases, in the choice of what to compare between them, and in the explanation of the differences and similarities that we may find. All of these must be based on the initial withholding of our received categories and standards, and the

Franz Krause

search for categories and explanations that are significant for the people we work with.

Furthermore, comparison can relativize our own terms and assumptions, not by opposing them to an unfamiliar other, but by decentering them through juxtaposition with multiple manifestations of the otherwise in our shared world.