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Comparison, Re-placed

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Heuristics of comparison have been an enduring topic of reflection, concern and innovation for anthropologists since the very beginnings of the discipline. However, some periods in the history of the discipline have seen particular effervescence around this methodological-theoretical problem. Like the 1950s or the 1980s, the present day feels like one of those moments of which future writers might say in retrospect that the problem and possibilities of comparison loomed large for our discipline. Part of this effervescence is related to a changing funding landscape – at least in Europe – in which anthropologists have been increasingly successful at obtaining (and increasingly expected by their institutions to obtain) large grants that involve the collaboration of multiple scholars in collaborative projects of the type the present book is based on. This institutional context gives new urgency to the long-standing agenda of rethinking the classic model of lone work in anthropology. In that process, the crafting of new comparative heuristics increasingly appears as a necessity as much as an opportunity.

The new heuristic proposed in this book – that of 'going to Pentecost' – involves a conscious play on a classic expository device in anthropology. Let us call this device *the place-concept binary*. This is as old and enduring a heuristic as the frontal-lateral contrast that I discussed elsewhere (Candea 2016) and that the authors invoke in the introduction. In many ways the two devices are related. As the authors note in the introduction, anthropologists usually go *somewhere*, to study *something*. This is a two-pronged affair: concepts (whether as categories,

traits, themes or topics) play the role of cutting across places (and times, but let us leave time aside for now). Places, by contrast, cut through these conceptual moves, grounding, multiplying and specifying them (Candea 2007: 180, 182). One classic way of deploying this contrast is to deploy the same concepts in different places – cross-cousin marriage, for instance, emerging here and there (Lévi-Strauss 1969). Another, now just as classic, is to imagine 'other' places breaking down 'our' concepts – as when we find that 'society' or 'nature' has no purchase on Mount Hagen (Strathern 1980, 1988). These map onto ideal-typical versions of the lateral and the frontal comparative heuristics respectively. But these two moves do not by any means exhaust the potential of the place-concept binary. Anthropologists have also imagined concepts travelling through places, changing as they go (Howe and Boyer 2015), or places acting as arbitrary, partial or equivocal locations for rethinking conceptual entities' interactions (Candea 2007; Cook, Laidlaw, and Mair 2009; Heywood 2015; see also Gluckman 1958; Van Velsen 1967).

What remains fairly stable, however, despite these various intellectual acrobatics, is the fact that the place-concept binary organizes two audiences for any anthropological argument, two communities of practice to which our writing can potentially be addressed. In very schematic terms these could be thought of as a regionalist and a generalist audience. However much anthropologists may rile against this – politically, conceptually and morally loaded – distinction, it continues, for now, to organize our teaching, our institutional structures of recognition and reward and most of all our publication. Who has not had the experience of wondering whether to send a particular article to a 'generalist' or to a 'regional' journal? Most of us write with both of these imagined audiences in mind, albeit not equally in any given piece (see Candea 2018 for a fuller discussion of this point).

In line with this classic view, the commonplace reading of this volume would be one in which three scholars have gone to study the same thing (concept, problem, theme, topic), namely Pentecostalism, in three different places (Port Vila in Vanuatu, Luanda in Angola and Kiriwina in the Trobriand Islands). And it is precisely against this reading that the contributors insist that they are in fact *going to Pentecost*, as the introduction outlines. Those three locations are recast as 'areas' within Pentecost. The aim to mess with the place-concept binary, to disrupt it in some way, could not be clearer. There are, however, two readings of the precise nature of this disruption. One reading would be that the aim of the volume is to disrupt that classic anthropological device for good – to break the concept-place binary, supersede it and leave it behind. The second, to which I return in closing, is that this disruption is merely

temporary and partial – paradoxically, perhaps, I will argue that this second reading is more radical.

There is evidence for the first reading: for instance, the introduction to this volume asserts that one of its aims is 'to get beyond what we can call a regional, contextual methodology or a territorial methodology' (introduction). If the present work is read as aiming to collapse the place-concept binary, that places it in good company – both 'the ontological turn' and 'multisited ethnography', evoked in the introduction, have sought to do this. The key device of the ontological turn has been to collapse the distinction between concepts and things (Henare, Holbraad and Wastell 2007; for a critique, see Heywood 2018b). This means not only viewing concepts as ethnographically derived but also insisting on the fact that such ethnographically derived concepts cannot be detached from their source or location (Holbraad 2017; Holbraad and Pedersen 2009). It would therefore be meaningless, on this view, to seek to study 'the same thing' in 'different places' – there can only ever be different 'place-things'. This is, in a nutshell, the inherent limitation of any comparative programme that puts all its eggs in the frontal basket – the difficulties with comparison associated with an earlier generation's radical relativism was another instance of the same problem (Holý 1987).

The root of an answer to that move was already contained in the multisited programme's own way of collapsing the place-concept binary. Rather than derive concepts from places and leave them there, multisited ethnography took a particular problem, thing or group of people and followed it wherever it might be found. The conceptual core of multisitedness – which was, I think, rather more radical than is suggested in the introduction – was to collapse the local/global distinction by, precisely, collapsing places and concepts in such a way as to make it possible to make one's research object (however geographically diffuse it might be) into one's site. Thus one's 'site' might be a group of people in various places (Smith 2006) or the aftermath of a catastrophe (Fortun 2001; Petryna 2002). This in turn implied a certain kind of holism in regard to one's 'site-object' (Candea 2007), which echoes the holism introduced more recently by the ontological turn in regard to its 'place-things'.

At the intersection of these two conceptual possibilities, one might thus read the present volume's heuristic proposal – 'going to Pentecost' – as an inventive solution to the problem of comparison after the ontological turn. If 'things' can be places and holism can be multilocal, anthropologists can move about or compare without having to worry about the dangers of decontextualizing their concepts. Their concepts can all still stem from the same ethnographic place – 'Pentecost'.

And yet as soon as it is collapsed, the place-concept distinction reappears. Here, it reappears in the form of the three 'phenomena' or traits of Pentecostalism that are elicited in the chapters of this book (inside/outside borders; 'anti-relativism'; the move from 'wealth' to 'waste'). If 'Pentecost' is the place, then these traits are the concepts that are studied 'there'. 'Pentecost' as a place-concept hybrid plays a transitional role between its 'areas' (Port Vila, Luanda, Kiriwina) and the conceptual payload of the volume, namely those three phenomena. The former are straightforwardly and unabashedly places, albeit places 'within' 'Pentecost', just as the latter are straightforwardly and unabashedly concepts. One is not, for instance, enjoined to 'go to "anti-relativism"' – at least not in this volume, although one might perhaps imagine this as a future permutation.

Pentecostalism has thus in the end played the role that themes and regions often play in edited volumes: a way to gather and focus accounts of different locations in order to produce new concepts from their comparison. In the classic *African Political Systems* (Fortes and Evans-Pritchard 1940), for instance, the pair formed by a conceptual theme (the notion of a political system) and a geographic location (Africa) gathers together accounts and produces a new conceptual distinction – between 'group A' and 'group B' forms of organization. Here, 'Pentecost' has acted as a gathering point in which the thematic was recast in the language of regionalism. But the general arc – from (particular) locations to (travelling) concepts – is a classic one. You cannot keep a good dualism down.

Of course, thinking of 'Pentecost' as a place rather than a theme or concept makes a difference to the nature of that arc, a difference that is more than semantic. As the introduction outlines, the approach would not have been the same, and neither would the concepts elicited in the final instance, had it not been for the injunction to treat 'Pentecost' as a place. That is a difference that makes a difference. The introduction outlines this difference clearly, and I will not revisit it here: treating 'Pentecost' as a place involves a particular attitude to the selection of problems to focus on, a particular concern with interlocutors' own sense of continuity, rupture and relevance. It also defines a particular horizon for the concepts (phenomena) elicited in the final instance.

So in comparing the present volume to older forms of comparative endeavour, my aim is not to diminish its claim to methodological novelty but rather to specify it. This brings me to my second reading of what the present project does to the place-concept binary. For in this longer view, what is distinctive about the present experiment appears not to be, after all, a move to eliminate or dissolve the place-concept

binary but rather a self-conscious play on it that *temporarily reverses* one of its constituent polarities. Indeed the 'going to Pentecost' move relies on the place-concept binary precisely as it troubles it. The injunction of this volume is to treat what is normally seen as a theme or an aspect of social life (Pentecostalism) as you would normally treat a place. But how does one normally treat a place in anthropology? One treats it precisely in relation to a concept or theme. The place-concept binary is linked to a series of other implied contrasts, in the sort of patterned arrangement that sociologist Andrew Abbott has called a 'methodological manifold' (Abbott 2001: 28). Abbott has in mind the standard association in social science between grand binaries such as positivism/interpretivism and analysis/narration – these binaries are mapped onto each other (and also onto other contrasts, such as society/culture) in a fairly stable way in most classic research programmes. On a much smaller scale, the place/concept binary is one of our own distinctly anthropological manifolds. Indeed the place/concept distinction usually comes associated with other binaries: specific/general, holistic/fragmentary, context/text, background/foreground, description/analysis etc.

In Abbott's view, the history of the social sciences can be read as a succession of inversions of those and other basic dualisms (ibid.). These operate as 'fractal distinctions' – since a conceptual revolution based on foregrounding description as against analysis, for instance, will soon find itself subdivided into a more descriptive and a more analytical branch. While Abbott's overarching vision of the history of theory is one of a regime of permanent conceptual revolution that in fact leaves much unchanged, his key point is that each inversion is profoundly productive – locally – of new questions, new empirical studies, new approaches and points of view. A particularly productive move, in this view, is the inversion of one of the dualisms constituent of a methodological manifold (see also Abbott 2004). Reversing one or more of these contrasts – treating the concept as a holistic entity and the location as a fragment of it, for instance – produces a profoundly generative disturbance.

This view of the productive nature of conceptual dualisms, which dovetails with a distinctive strand in anthropological thinking (Candea et al. 2015; Heywood 2018a; Jean-Klein and Riles 2005; Strathern 2011; Yarrow 2008), is importantly at odds with the pervasive call in the past thirty years to collapse dualisms and binaries. It is facile, yet true, to point out that such talk of collapsing binaries is itself just putting the onus on one pole of an enduring philosophical binary: dualism/non-dualism. In a broader view, the dualism/non-dualism binary, too, is an enduring conceptual pair or 'fractal distinction'. The insistence on non-dualism has been generative as long as it has stood out against a

dualist consensus, but it is beginning to run out of steam and is itself turning consensual. The more generative conceptual move may now be – for a time – to let the pendulum swing back towards dualism.

I would like to place the present volume on this side of that pendulum swing – and it is of course a decision, for one could read the volume otherwise. On this view, the reappearance of 'standard-looking' places (Kiriwina, Luanda, Port Vila) and concepts (inside/outside borders; 'anti-relativism'; the move from 'wealth' to 'waste') is a feature and not a bug. This reappearance would be problematic if the aim were to dissolve the place-concept binary for good. It is to be expected if the volume is actually performing a temporary disruption. That is the difference after all between a revolution and an experiment. A revolution seeks to do away with a previous state of affairs. An experiment produces a set-apart context in which the normal state of affairs is tweaked and transformed in controlled ways. When the experiment is over, we return to the normal state of affairs, hopefully with new insights in hand. This, then, would mark out the present volume's heuristic gambit most clearly from the methodological manifestoes of multisited ethnography or the ontological turn. Where the latter sought to collapse a distinction, the present volume's achievement is, on the contrary, to make it more clearly visible.

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