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## Some Observations on the Comparative Method\*

### Introductory

The comparative method has been a subject of perennial interest among students of society and culture. Sociologists and social anthropologists have written about it for the last hundred years and more, although it cannot be said that they have reached any agreed conclusions about its correct use.

I would like at the outset to indicate a new development in our subject whose implications have not so far been seriously examined. Much of the appeal of the earlier use of the comparative method, particularly by social anthropologists, lay in the attention it devoted to the study of non-western societies. It can easily be shown that the conclusions drawn about family and marriage, or about economic processes, or about the relation between religion and society remain incomplete or even misleading so long as they are based on studies confined within the context of a single society or a single type of society. Here the work of the scholars associated with the *Année sociologique* set an example, for they attempted to examine within a single framework all the varieties of human society, both western and non-western, from the simplest to the most complex, or, in the language of those times, from the most primitive to the most advanced.

Although the full integration of the study of western and non-western societies still remains to be achieved in practice, scholars have since the end of the 19th century steadily extended the range of the societies they have investigated through broadly similar concepts and methods. However, the scholars who began to extend their observation to an increasing range of societies were themselves all members of the same society or the same type of society. It would not be unfair to describe the project of the

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*Année sociologique* as the study of all societies, western as well as non-western, by western scholars. At least for that generation of scholars the question did not arise whether their project might alter significantly by extending to the limit not only the range of investigation but also the range of investigators.

That question has now got to be raised, and I believe that it will acquire increasing salience in discussions of the comparative method. There are now scholars in India, Indonesia, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and elsewhere engaged in the study of their own societies. This began after the First World War when a handful of scholars, trained in the West, sought to apply the methods and techniques they had learnt there to the study of their own societies. The last few decades have witnessed an enormous growth of sociology and social anthropology in these countries, and a beginning has been made by scholars from there to study aspects of western society. This has introduced new perspectives and it has raised questions about the very concepts and categories used by earlier scholars, both foreign and indigenous, in the study of societies in Asia and Africa.

The comparative method was in a sense the great achievement of 19th-century sociology and social anthropology. The most extensive comparisons were attempted, not only of whole societies, but also of particular institutions and practices: kinship systems, marriage practices, techniques of agriculture and pottery, magical practices, religious beliefs, and so on. The central place assigned to comparison was signaled by Durkheim when he wrote: "Comparative sociology is not a special branch of sociology; it is sociology itself".

If we take a sufficiently broad view of comparison, then it will be obvious that all sociologists and anthropologists have to rely on it, and they would probably all agree that there has to be some method in the comparisons they make. But beyond this one finds important differences, for there are those who are enthusiastic about the comparative method and those who are skeptical about it. Among the enthusiasts I would include Spencer, Tylor, Durkheim and Radcliffe-Brown; and among the skeptics, Boas, Goldenweiser and Evans-Pritchard. The great wave of enthusiasm for the comparative method belongs to the past, and today there are probably more skeptics than enthusiasts.

In the 19th century, the principal attraction of the comparative method lay in the belief that it could be used for discovering scientific laws about human society and culture. The strong advocates of the comparative method believed in the possibility of a natural science of society that would establish regularities of co-existence and succession among the forms of social life by means of systematic comparisons. It must not be forgotten that in 19th-century anthropology, the study of social and cul-

tural phenomena was typically combined with the study of the physical or biological aspects of human life. And of course both Spencer and Durkheim were greatly influenced by the organic analogy, and in Durkheim, in particular, we find not only a metaphorical but also a methodological use of that analogy.

The difficulty of arriving at valid generalizations through the classification and comparison of societies on a worldwide scale made some anthropologists uneasy. Within a year of the publication of Durkheim's manifesto for the comparative method, there appeared an essay by Franz Boas, entitled, "The limitations of the comparative method of anthropology". Boas objected above all to the sweeping generalizations made through the use of the comparative method, and recommended studies on a more limited geographical scale and with a more careful attention to facts. He introduced the distinction, that was to appear in one form or another in the writings of his successors, between the 'comparative method' and the 'historical method', clearly expressing his preference for the latter over the former.

Boas did not declare himself to be in principle against the comparative method, but he put his finger on a weakness of that method that was to embarrass its users in the future. His point was simply that "before extended comparisons are made, the comparability of the material *must be proved*". Now it is one thing to recommend caution while making comparisons; but how can the comparability of the material be proved before the comparisons are made? The proof of comparability in advance can be used to undermine virtually any application of the comparative method.

No one can deny the hazards of reckless comparisons. Such comparisons, made characteristically in the service of some grandiose theory, jeopardise the serious study of society and culture in our own time as they did in the time of Boas. But then there are disadvantages also in moving to the opposite extreme. Boas and his successors felt most at ease with comparisons between what may be called 'neighbourly cultures'. But how much caution do we have to exercise in ensuring the conditions of 'neighbourliness'? Neighbourliness is obviously not just a matter of geographical propinquity, although that was important to Boas. By making the conditions of comparability successively more rigorous, we might find ourselves limited to the study of the unique constellation of characteristics in a single society. It is in this sense that Boas's historical method might become opposed rather than complementary to the comparative method.

## Difference and Otherness

I would now like to take up the question of similarity and difference in comparative studies. What should be the aim of comparison in sociology and social anthropology? Should it be to identify similarity or to discover difference? Should our aim be to show that all societies are alike or that each one is unique? These questions may appear trivial, but people have responded differently to them, and their responses reflect differences of esthetic, moral and political judgement.

It is obvious that when anthropologists make comparisons, they find both similarities and differences, and I do not know of a single anthropologist whose comparisons have in fact brought to light *only* similarities or *only* differences. It is nevertheless the case that some anthropologists have argued that the principal aim of comparison is to discover difference, although the forms of their arguments and the reasons behind them have not all been the same. Very broadly speaking, one can distinguish between the view that the societies studied by anthropologists all differ among themselves, and the view that they are all different from the anthropologist's own society, viz. western society. Again, the two views reflect differences of esthetic, moral and political judgement, but they are closely intertwined with each other.

In an essay on the comparative method, Evans-Pritchard expresses dissatisfaction with anthropologists from Frazer to Radcliffe-Brown for their search for universality which, according to him, "defeats the sociological purpose, which is to explain differences rather than similarities". Evans-Pritchard expresses his own bias for differences somewhat tentatively, thus: "I would like to place emphasis on the importance for social anthropology, as a comparative discipline, of differences, because it would be held that in the past the tendency has been to place the stress on similarities, as conspicuously in *The Golden Bough*, whereas it is the differences which would seem to invite sociological explanation".

Evans-Pritchard's stress on difference, as he himself indicates, is partly to redress the balance, but there seems to be more to it than that. It is hard to understand why difference should invite sociological attention more urgently than similarity. The stress on difference does not have any obvious methodological advantage, and seems to me to be the outcome of an unstated, and perhaps unconscious, esthetic preference. An esthetic preference for the exotic, not at all uncommon among anthropologists, can lead to serious misrepresentation. No doubt an equally serious misrepresentation can result from an unstated esthetic preference for sameness.

For a hundred years since the days of Boas and Haddon, anthropologists from Europe and America have travelled to distant places to study the customs and institutions of the peoples of the world. They have not done so solely for the purpose of discovering the laws of social life through the application of the comparative method. Many of them have travelled to Asia, Africa and, now increasingly, Melanesia in search of a different experience and a different way of life. Something of the explorer's outlook has become a permanent part of the anthropologist's habit of mind; or, as Lévi-Strauss has put it, combining romance with science, the anthropologist is "the astronomer of the social sciences".

It is, however, one thing to indulge a taste for what is different and another to try to make a distinct scientific discipline out of the study of other ways of life. One of the most popular text-books of anthropology in Britain in the sixties and seventies, written, incidentally, by an Oxford colleague and former pupil of Professor Evans-Pritchard's, was entitled *Other Cultures*. Its author, like most of his Oxford colleagues of that period, had done fieldwork in Africa where, moreover, he had served in the colonial administration, and he had written a text-book based on his own fieldwork and that of his colleagues. Assuming that the title was meant to be taken seriously, one wonders what the significance of such a textbook would be for students and teachers of anthropology in Africa.

To some extent, every discipline constructs its own object, and it has been said that the object that western anthropology has constructed for itself is the Other. As one would expect, there is an ambivalent attitude in the anthropologist towards his object, and the ambivalence has deepened over the years. The strong emphasis on the 'otherness' of other cultures has sometimes been only a pretext for stressing the uniqueness of the anthropologist's own culture.

Perhaps the construction of the object as 'Other' — the view from afar — necessarily entails a certain amount of foreshortening and distortion. Much depends on the extent to which the anthropologist distances himself from his object of study, and the intellectual and political intent with which he does so. It would be a mistake to suppose that those who talk about the 'unity of mankind', or the fundamental similarity of all societies, even when they do so sincerely, become immune to the risks of foreshortening. For they might represent other societies and cultures as copies, more or less imperfectly formed, of their own.

The point to stress here about those who make a dogma of the unity of mankind is that in their comparisons other societies often come out not simply as copies, but as imperfect or unformed copies, of their own society. This is seen most clearly in 19th-century evolutionary theory which took it for granted that western societies had attained the highest levels of

institutional advancement in every respect, and that other societies would follow them, also in every respect, in due course of time. Nineteenth-century evolutionary theory fell out of favour in the 20th century. But its spirit was revived in our own time by what has come to be known as 'development theory'; that, however, is a whole subject by itself into which I cannot enter here.

What I would like to stress is that in making comparisons we must try to deal even-handedly with similarity and difference, and avoid making it a dogma that either the one or the other is the more fundamental of the two. This may sound like a counsel of perfection, and somewhat banal at that. But the point needs to be made because of the change now taking place in the context of comparative studies.

As I pointed out at the beginning, in the early use of the comparative method, from Durkheim to Radcliffe-Brown, scholars from one part of the world were studying societies in all parts of the world, their own as well as others. When such a scholar studied his own society, he was regarded as a sociologist and when he studied another culture he was regarded as an anthropologist. A kind of objective distinction between 'ourselves' and 'others' was built into the comparative method. All this is rapidly changing, and we will need to weave into our comparative studies a far more sensitive treatment of similarity and difference than has been in evidence so far. As an Indian interested in comparative studies, I have found it frustrating to move in a world in which what is sociology for one person is anthropology for another.

## Typification versus Classification

I drew attention a little while ago to the problem that arises when we treat the Other as a copy of ourselves. I must now say something about the practice, common among anthropologists who study civilizations, of treating the Other not as a copy but as an inversion. This practice is rooted in the belief, widely held and sometimes expressed, by western scholars in the uniqueness of their own civilization. It leads to a distortion of the non-western civilization being studied because those aspects of it that differ most from western civilization receive exaggerated attention and those that differ least from it receive scant attention.

In this kind of comparative method, which proceeds more by contrast than by comparison, not only are differences between civilizations — China, India, etc. — flattened out, but the past and the present of each civilization tend to be treated as one. Here the contrast is between western

civilization which is dynamic and ever-changing, and other civilizations in which change is so slow that it need not be taken into account.

If I may dwell for a moment on the Indian case, a kind of privileged position is assigned to India's past in the comparison, or rather the contrast, made between Indian and western civilizations. Indian civilization is represented by a structure of values that is viewed as relatively stable or unchanging, so that one can speak of the same structure whether one is speaking of India at present, in the recent past or in the distant past. These accounts of the structure of Indian society, although sometimes informed by fieldwork of a very high quality, take their orientation from the representation of it in classical Indian literature. I have elsewhere described this approach as the 'Indological approach' whose ablest contemporary exponent is Professor Dumont, who has had a great influence on Indian studies through his own writings and through the journal, *Contributions to Indian sociology*, established by him in 1957. A marked emphasis on the unique significance of the Indian religious tradition may be found also in the ethnosociological approach of the Chicago school of anthropologists as represented in particular in the work of McKim Marriott.

Professor Dumont has spoken of his own work as representing a 'typifying' approach to which he has opposed the 'classifying' approach to be found in the work of Barth, Berreman and others. The classifying approach derives, in his view, from the natural sciences, and it leads to a comparison of part with part on a superficial assumption of their similarity, and without due regard to the meaning of each part in the whole of which it is a part. The typifying approach is, by contrast, a comprehensive approach, for in discussing any aspect of a society it always keeps the whole in view. Underlying all this is a very strong assumption of the organic unity of a civilization.

Dumont has used his typifying approach to formulate a comprehensive contrast between Indian and western (or modern) society. Such a contrast has been made repeatedly by western students of Indian society from the middle of the 19th century onwards. But Dumont's contrast is, in the judgement of many, at once the most forceful and the most subtle, and I would like to make a few observations on it in order to clarify my own position on the typifying approach.

Dumont's contrasting types are indicated by the titles of his two books, *Homo hierarchicus* for India, and *Homo aequalis* for the West. These types are constructed on the basis of the values said to be predominant or paramount in the two societies in question. Hierarchy, which characterizes Indian society in all its aspects, is itself an aspect of holism, according to which the part (i.e. the individual) is subordinated to the whole (i.e.

society). Conversely, in western society, equality is an aspect of individualism which has there established itself as the paramount value. In India, hierarchy animates every aspect of life and gives it meaning; in western, i.e. modern society, hierarchy is fundamentally meaningless.

No doubt, there are collective identities in western or modern society based, for instance, on race and ethnicity, and no doubt there is ranking of both individuals and groups in it; but these, Dumont would maintain, exist on the plane of facts and not values, which are his main concern. As he has put it, "Differences of rank run contrary to our dominant ideology of social life, which is equalitarian. They are for us fundamentally meaningless". One cannot talk about hierarchy in the West but only about stratification, whereas it is misleading to talk about stratification in India which is a hierarchical society. In a similar vein, the individual has no value *within* society in India; in order to be an individual in India, one has to renounce society and become a *sannyasi*.

In going over the full range of Dumont's work, one is struck over and over again by the neatness of the contrasts and the symmetry of the inversions. "India is hierarchical, the West is egalitarian; the West values the individual, in India it is only the group that counts": these apparent commonplaces are hammered into the form of profound and ineluctable truths by a massive array of fact and argument put together with unsurpassed intellectual vigour.

A careful reading of the books, *Homo hierarchicus* and *Homo aequalis* will show that the arguments have been constructed somewhat differently in the two cases. The book on India, although it takes its orientation from the past, is an exercise in anthropology, making extensive use of the data of ethnographic fieldwork. The book on the West is an exercise in the history of ideas, based on a different kind of empirical material. It is not that no one has done ethnographic fieldwork in the West, not to speak of the enormous body of sociological work on ranking and stratification in Europe and the United States. One will look in vain for a discussion of this literature although the book was designed to be a counterpart to the volume on hierarchy in India. If one decides in advance that differences of rank are 'fundamentally meaningless' in western society, one will naturally pay little attention to the literature on social ranking in the West.

Professor Dumont's book on India tells us a great deal about hierarchy, and even if it is not all new, it presents many new insights. His book on the West tells us nothing about inequality which exists in every western society, though declared by him to be 'meaningless'. What is more, it tells us very little about equality, although the title of its French version is *Homo aequalis* (in English it is called *From Mandeville to Marx*). The



book is about individualism rather than equality, and there is a presumed correspondence between the two that is nowhere seriously discussed. Nor is there any serious discussion of the different meanings assigned to equality, some of which are less consistent with individualism than others. A classifying approach may lead to superficial comparisons, but a typifying approach can lead to misleading contrasts. It is not always easy to stay on the right side of the thin line between the scholarly art of typifying and the popular practice of stereotyping.

There is an ambiguous use of history characteristic of the typifying approach of Dumont and others. There are two kinds of contrasts used, between Indian society and western society on the one hand, and between Indian society and modern society on the other, and the two contrasts tend to be merged. 'Holism' and 'hierarchy' are associated unambiguously with India; but 'individualism' and 'equality' are treated as defining features, now of western society and again of modern society, so that India is contrasted sometimes with western society and at others with modern society. It is as if India (and other non—western societies) were denied modernity by definition.

In some ways Dumont's contrast between *Homo hierarchicus* and *Homo aequalis* is a restatement of Tocqueville's contrast between aristocratic and democratic societies. But Tocqueville's contrast was a historical one, whereas Dumont's is, if the distinction be permitted, a typological one. Tocqueville was interested in showing how aristocratic societies were being transformed into democratic ones in the western world. In Dumont's scheme there is very little room for the passage from *homo hierarchicus* to *homo aequalis*. Yet it is precisely with this acutely problematic passage that sociologists in India and other societies inheriting a hierarchical order from the past have to contend.

There is no doubt that Indian society had a markedly hierarchical structure in the past and that much of it continues to exist in the present: one encounters hierarchy at every turn in contemporary India. But there have also been important changes since the middle of the 19th century and more particularly since the middle of the twentieth. A new Constitution has assigned a central place to equality and the rights of the individual. Adult franchise, agrarian reform and positive discrimination have become important ingredients of the contemporary Indian reality. They may not have succeeded in establishing equality here and now, but they have seriously undermined the legitimacy of the traditional hierarchy. An enquiry into the meaning and significance of all this comes up against the wall established by the typifying approach.

The typifying approach used by Dumont has put all its emphasis on the enduring traditional structure, and paid little attention to newness and

change. It has had a great appeal for those who have watched contemporary India from afar. But it has been out of tune with the perceptions of many Indian sociologists engaged in the study of their own society for whom disorder and change have been a part of everyday experience. I would like to repeat again that the whole context of comparative sociology is being altered by the fact that not only are the same people studying different kinds of societies, but that the same society is being studied by different kinds of people.

### Conflicting Forces and Counterpoints

I have now reached the point where I would like to introduce an alternative approach, associated with the work of the Dutch sociologist, W. F. Wertheim. As an enthusiast for the comparative method, I have always been uneasy about the typifying approach, its exaggerated contrasts and its stress on difference. Professor Wertheim's work has given me a basis for articulating my misgiving. I have in mind his view of society as a field of conflicting values and also the idea of the counterpoint, adapted by him from the work of the Dutch historian, Jan Romein.

In a paper first written almost forty years ago on "Society as a composite of conflicting values", Wertheim had drawn attention to the co-existence of disparate elements in all human societies. He developed the same theme at a seminar in Delhi in 1965. Drawing attention to the different approaches prevalent in sociology, he said, "In my view, we should look for the common denominator in the realm of values". But he then went on to say, "I would suggest that, in any society, more than one value system is to be found as a determinant of human behaviour and judgement". I would go further and speak of a field of conflicting forces, because in dealing with any society, whether in Asia or Europe, we have to deal not only with values, important though they are, but also with interests.

Even where certain values are dominant, there are others that act as counterpoints. "Conflicting sets of values may function as a kind of counterpoint to the dominant set. They may be dormant and hardly noticeable, but their existence and latent acceptance among certain individuals or groups forms, from the outset, a potential threat to the stability of the system." Here we have a different way of looking at societies, including the so-called traditional societies, with the eyes open to evidence of contradiction and change.

Those who adopt the typifying approach no doubt acknowledge the existence in any society of elements other than its paramount values. But

these other elements do not receive the attention due to them. Either they are relegated to an inferior domain, that of 'mere facts' as opposed to values; or they are treated as values that are 'subordinated to' or 'encompassed by' the paramount values. The advantage with the idea of counterpoint, as I understand it, is that it acknowledges the coexistence of divergent values without seeking necessarily to place them in a hierarchical arrangement. In a hierarchical arrangement the 'encompassing' and the 'encompassed' elements are in a stable equilibrium; no necessary assumption of a stable equilibrium is required by the idea of the counterpoint.

Let me explain briefly why I consider it so important, in defining society as a field of conflicting forces, to take both values and interests into account. As I have indicated, the contrapuntal conception of values is fundamentally different from the hierarchical conception. In the latter, values arrange themselves according to their own internal logic, the inferior being encompassed by the superior. But as we know, and as Wertheim has suggested, different and even incompatible values may be characteristically associated with different groups, classes and categories in the same society, such as upper and lower castes, landowners and landless, or men and women. It becomes easier to understand these contrapuntal values when we keep in sight the divergent interests of the groups, classes and categories that are their characteristic bearers.

It is far from my intention to suggest that societies are carried along solely by the conflict of interests, and that we have no need to take values into account except as reflections of those interests. Indeed, I have tried to repudiate strongly that view in my work. Every society has, if not one single paramount value, at least its own distinctive equilibrium of values which, moreover, is often an unstable equilibrium. All I would say is that we need to understand the dynamics of this equilibrium and that we cannot effectively do so without taking interests into account.

It is true that many of the so-called traditional societies maintained broadly the same structure of values over long periods of time. This continuity is evident in all the societies of South Asia where old modes of perception and evaluation have survived major innovations in law and politics. But these innovations in law and politics have also introduced new modes of perception and evaluation. It is impossible to determine in advance which of these will prevail where, and it cannot be an established principle of method to subordinate new elements of value to old ones simply because the latter have had a longer life than the former.

To revert for a moment to the India example, its traditional structure was for centuries dominated by the hierarchical order of castes. It was a society in which inequality in both principle and practice prevailed in most spheres, and one, moreover, in which the individual was subordi-

nated to the group. The long period of Muslim rule introduced some new elements, but these did not alter substantially either the old morphology or the old scheme of values. The impact of British rule was of a different magnitude, partly because it came in on the crest of capitalist expansion which was introducing new economic arrangements and new social values on a world-wide scale. It generated a nationalist movement, of which there are parallels everywhere, that sought to forge its own ideology by combining new elements of value with old ones. The nationalist movement was critical not only of the colonial power but also of many elements of value inherited from the past, including those associated with caste.

India became independent in 1947 after two centuries of colonial rule. It adopted a new Constitution in 1950 which embodies very different values from those that prevailed in the past, and where the stress is on equality between individuals in place of the hierarchy of groups. I do not mean to suggest that the old values disappeared as soon as the new Constitution was adopted; they are, as mentioned earlier, in evidence everywhere in contemporary India. At the same time, they now operate in an altered moral, political and legal environment in which they have to contend with other values that act as their counterpoints.

If we are to take seriously the view of society as a field of conflicting forces, we have to renounce the organic analogy — or the idea of the organic unity of societies — which has vitiated the comparisons made by the proponents of the classifying approach as well as the contrasts maintained by the proponents of the typifying approach. There are indeed similarities and differences among societies, but these are not at all like the similarities and differences that we encounter in the world of plants and animals. Although societies differ among themselves, they are not separated from each other by the kinds of boundaries that separate organisms. Nor is there in the animal kingdom anything like the interpenetration among societies that has become such a common feature of the contemporary world. It is this interpenetration that makes it more appropriate to speak of societies as fields of conflicting forces than as discrete and bounded units. I am, of course, speaking of society in the broad sense and not just about the nation state.

It appears to me that if we treat societies as fields of conflicting forces, rather than as discrete and bounded units, the classification of social types according to the rules of taxonomy may not be a very rewarding exercise. Those rules require that comparisons should proceed on a strictly graduated scale, first between the nearest neighbours, then between groups of near neighbours and so on, just as in biology one first compares species within the same genus, then genera within the same family, and so on. Societies are implicated in each other to such a large extent in the con-

temporary world that one will find it hard to construct any simple scale of neighbourliness with which to assess the interpenetration, in terms of ideas, beliefs and values, of, let us say, Britain and India, or the Netherlands and Indonesia.

The above difficulty is not avoided, but in a way accentuated by the typifying approach. By stressing the organic unity of each society, and by dwelling on what it owes to its own past and ignoring what it owes to others, it tends to represent societies as mutually impenetrable substances.

## The Comparison of Whole Societies

A hundred years and more after Spencer, Tylor and Durkheim, it cannot be said that sociologists and social anthropologists have a method that they would all agree to describe as the comparative method. There is as much disagreement among them about it now as there was in the past, even though they have trimmed their ambitions considerably about what they can expect from such a method in the study of society and culture. One of the main problems — or perhaps it is merely the symptom of a deeper problem — is that, while they make all sorts of comparisons themselves, they judge the comparisons that others make by excessively severe standards.

It is difficult to see how sociology and social anthropology can justify their existence without making comparisons extensively and continuously. The very fact that we are able to talk about matrilineal descent, or patron-client relations, or occupational mobility shows not only that we are inexorably dependent on comparisons, but, more importantly, that the comparisons made in the past, no matter by what method, have yielded some results. Nor is it true that the best results have come only when the comparisons were narrow, and never when they were broad.

The idea that the comparison of whole societies constitutes the core of the comparative method accounts for many of the difficulties faced by that method. That idea was at the bottom of Durkheim's preoccupation with social types and the rules for their constitution and classification; it was also at the bottom of Radcliffe-Brown's preoccupation with natural kinds. In both cases it was associated with the belief that the comparison of whole societies was an essential part of the discovery of the laws of social life. The prospect of such discovery has been abandoned by most sociologists and anthropologists, but many of them continue to adhere to the belief in the importance of comparing whole societies; that belief often comes out in the criticisms they make of the

comparisons attempted by others. While making a concession to classification, Dumont insists, "If classification is to be introduced further on, it will have to start from wholes and not from itemized features".

The comparison of whole societies requires us to categorise and label each and every society, or at least the ones we seek to compare and contrast. This process of labelling is a part of ordinary discourse, and it is impossible to avoid it altogether in scholarly discussion. There is no great harm in speaking about agnatic and cognatic societies, or about hierarchical and egalitarian societies, although, strictly speaking, we should speak of the agnatic principle or the egalitarian principle, since each of these principles generally coexists in one and the same society with all kinds of other principles. The label may be a convenience, but to take it too literally may lead to serious misrepresentation.

Durkheim's labelling of social types was based on a conscious use of the analogy between societies and organisms, and he maintained that there were social species for the same reason that there were species in biology. The labels used by him — simple polysegmental societies, polysegmental societies singly compounded, etc., etc. — have become obsolete, and were never seriously applied except in the most rudimentary comparisons. Such use as they had was limited to the comparison of the simplest types of societies, and Durkheim never used them systematically in comparing and contrasting complex states and civilizations.

When we deal with larger systems, the states and civilizations in Asia and elsewhere, we encounter the coexistence of several different types in one and the same social field. The organic analogy, on which Durkheim based his constitution of social types, breaks down because there are no clear boundaries and interpenetration is pervasive, if not universal. Moreover, the types differ so enormously in scale that it becomes difficult to determine what should be the proper units of comparison.

It is clear that the comparison of whole societies cannot be satisfactorily made on a morphological basis because human societies do not have the same kind of structure as animal organisms. In fact the organic analogy is no longer very widely used by sociologists and social anthropologists. The morphological conception of social structure, representing the disposition of groups and classes in a society, has been displaced by a different conception of structure in which ideas and values have pride of place. Can the comparison (or contrast) of whole societies be more satisfactorily based on an 'ideological' than on a 'morphological' conception of structure? I think not; the difficulties are even greater here because of the lability of ideas and values, and their inherent tendency, particularly marked in the modern world, to flow across boundaries.

It is doubtful that we will ever have a comparative method, like some

ideal method of the natural scientists, about whose proper use sociologists and social anthropologists will reach complete agreement. At the same time our deepest insights into society and culture are reached in and through comparison. We have to improvise, and to exercise our judgement as well as our imagination, and beyond that we can only hope that our comparisons — as well as our contrasts — will be illuminating and fruitful. At any rate, it will be futile to suspend our comparisons until the perfect classification or the perfect typology of human societies is placed within our grasp.