

Issue Response

Comparing and Being Compared: Choice and Power in Everyday Comparisons Under Neoliberalism

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In 1960, after defecting from Poland and spending some years in the agitation of the Western European émigré community, the poet Czeslaw Milosz made his way to an academic position at the University of California, Berkeley. There he found himself temporarily paralyzed by the absence of direction regarding his professional activities: there was nothing to resist, no constraint to give him shape (1990). My American students, reading of this in a graduate seminar in the late 1990s, were confused. Surprise followed when the two international students, from Turkey and Serbia respectively, simultaneously shook their heads, opened their mouths, and said, "You need walls." Both women then cited examples to argue that a sudden collapse of constraint might not just disorient intellectuals but drive them to seek security in extremist nationalism or fundamentalism.

Lowering the tension, the Serbian student went on to describe her own introduction to the Land of Opportunity, as, newly arrived in Ohio, she went out to purchase basic supplies. "I grew up in a Communist country," she explained. "There was just -- shampoo." Now she found a whole aisle of it, different brands, different colors, different scents, and, most mysteriously, varieties targeted to customers with different kinds of hair: normal, dry, oily, treated, curly. (The

further nuance of race-targeted marketing was not obvious to her at that stage.) She got worried: how could she find out whether her hair was normal or not, and what would be the consequences if she bought the wrong bottle?

Everyone laughed at this. The foreigner's comparative perspective allowed even natives to recognize the absurdity of a characteristic American experience: standing paralyzed in a big-box store before an overwhelming array of lightly differentiated alternatives, with insufficient information to determine which differences matter among all those that are manifestly trivial. At about this same period, the American sociologist Barry Schwartz was identifying and labeling the phenomenon, resulting in his book *The Paradox of Choice* (2004). Such a vaulting into theory is a characteristic academic move. The lateral move of comparison is, however, the way that most of us escape habitus most of the time. In encountering an alternative, we discover that some taken-for-granted everyday procedure can be organized differently: a startling, sometimes upsetting realization.¹ The insight can arise from a personal experience of mobility or be achieved in conversation across positions. It can come from direct observation or vicarious engagement--hence the importance of fiction in the formation of contemporary selfhood.

The accounts of everyday comparison in this special issue of *Cultural Analysis* elaborate the implications of the shampoo story, opening them from the microcosm of consumer choice toward primary realms of engagement for actors in contemporary wealthy societies: work, family, politics, and leisure. Like the shampoo story, the articles by Petersson, Böstrom,

and Öhlander and by Siim highlight international, intercultural experience as a source of insight into societal particularities as well as perplexity over personal options. Like the shampoo story, the articles by Flor and Groth highlight the play of power and competition in acts of comparison. More specifically, they uncover something that might be diagnostic of everyday comparison under neoliberalism: the interplay between comparing and being compared, between individual preferences and societal rankings. Recalling the context in which the teller judged the shampoo story worth telling—a classroom suddenly made aware of the specific dynamics of choice in contemporary liberal democracies -- can alert us to the *tertium comparationis*, the shared framework, that makes these four cases comparable.

As Groth's introduction observes, an older anthropology undertook comparison in the interest of classification, creating tendentious categories that asserted global hierarchies of civilization and were used to justify global hierarchies of power. The residues of these practices are very much with us, and while theoretical critique is well-established, the practical challenges are being made today on the streets of Western cities as old statues come down and the foundation of institutions are brought into question. These residual hierarchies continue to inform both the international encounters described in this issue's first two articles and the modalities of ranking and measuring that infect the second two.

This issue's concern with subjectivities might also send us back to a different conversation in an older anthropology, where everyday practices of comparison were also addressed, if not described as

such. I am thinking of the preoccupation with envy in postwar Mediterraneanist anthropology and peasant studies (e.g., Foster 1972); envy remains a prominent phenomenon in communities formed in scarce-resource conditions or competing in the present for rival goods of connection or visibility. Envy develops, along with suspicion, when one member of a peer group is seen to have access to resources closed off to the others. It presupposes, if not an actual zero-sum situation, at least a context of limitation and stagnation in which the envious actor cannot expect to achieve the same entrée or position held by the actor envied. Envy depends on a sense of peer group, reflecting the negative dimension of what has become a largely positive relationship among Groth's amateur cyclists. A comparison between the self and a more successful peer excites a sense of unfairness and resentment.

There is, to be sure, more dynamism in the interaction between subjective emotions and societal position than these accounts offer us. The Marxist anthropologists of the same period had a different story to tell about peasant communities and the national or colonial frameworks within which they operated. From the top of the social scale, practices of comparison across the great divides of colonial and industrial societies generated the powerful blend of affective stereotype and structural discrimination currently identified as "systemic racism," among other modes of dehumanizing marked actors. Conversely, further down the social scale, upward comparisons stimulated both concerted quests for justice and destructive climates of *ressentiment*.

Still, the individual remains the privi-

leged liberal actor, and it is the transformed position of the individual under global capitalism that our first two articles highlight. Emigration was one great disruptor of the ethos of older peasant societies, with their mix of reciprocity and envy. Today the possibility of mobility—indeed, the disposition toward mobility—has generated new practices of everyday comparison for individuals. Instead of seeing other ways of life as cut off from their own, actors may encounter them as alternative possibilities. This marks a radical change from the early modern “calling”—a stable occupational identity into which individuals were hailed and sorted by virtue of birth and early socialization. Even the subsequent “career”—a forward-leaning term derived from the course on which a race is run—is giving way to a less structured trajectory. Movement from point to point and place to place no longer entails a straight line or a fixed destination; instead, the actor may ramble toward an indistinct horizon that eternally retreats from view.

The Swedish professionals interviewed by Petersson, Böstrom, and Öhlander can be seen as the perfect subjects of globalization: self-maximizing individuals with access to a world of opportunities for improving their skills, making an impact on the world, building a career, and raising a family. They are cosmopolitan a priori, defined as a cohort not by birth or ancestry but by their professional education in Sweden. The Swedish welfare state provides them with a foundation of security that both allows and provokes their pursuit of risk, and it offers a baseline against which they can assess other experiences. This sociocentrism interacts with the global hierarchy of expertise: they move

“up” to the US and Germany to learn new techniques or “down” to conflict zones in the global South for philanthropic work. Their explicit comparisons, however, are articulated in a culturalist key that imposes formal equality and equivalence among the practices of nation-states. The Swedes savor the pleasure of being cosmopolitan—recognizing and appreciating different options, mixing and optimizing their own lives. They assess their personal tradeoffs by engaging in intercultural comparison on such questions as family relations and work-life balance. The price of this cosmopolitan mobility is what the authors nicely christen “cultural jet lag” and uneasiness over decisions taken: as a Finnish immigrants’ proverb has it, once you’ve crossed the Atlantic you’re always on the wrong side.

To be sure, the Swedish professionals are concerned with being compared as well as comparing. Although their individual choice and agency are foregrounded in this account, a primary motive of their movements is the desire to enhance their credentials and status as they compete for career advancement. The Estonian labor migrants discussed in Siim’s article are not dissimilar in their preoccupations, but their position is less advantageous and their constraints are more onerous. They too compare cultural patterns and weigh tradeoffs regarding gender relations, family life, work opportunities as they take the ferry back and forth between Tallinn and Helsinki. But they are more painfully aware than the Swedes of being compared, and not just at the level of individual attainment but as a group of migrants among other migrants: a broad category that bears an ever heavier stigma in a Europe turning

against globalization. As Estonians, they have been socialized within a national tradition of self-positioning forced by location on a geopolitical boundary: aligning with Finland against Russia, with the scholarly support of comparative linguistics and anthropology; in the postsocialist period claiming model Nordic or European conduct in comparison to the other Baltic republics. Even for these mobile migrants within the Schengen area, culture is no free marketplace of lifestyle choices but an arena of moralized invidious comparison in which the self is put to the test (cf. Seljamaa 2013).

Accordingly, Siim's Estonian interlocutors are highly sensitive to the power dynamics and rhetorical force of comparison; when typed as undesirable, they deploy defensive comparisons in turn. Like incumbent immigrant communities in the United States distancing themselves from newer or darker-skinned arrivals, the Estonians highlight their integration within Finnish society compared to other migrants, particularly to the highly marked "refugees" but in some cases even to less exemplary fellow Estonians. Still, this very self-consciousness does not afford them security but lays them open to uncanny comparison: the abrupt, unwilling recognition of the familiar within the strange. Resenting their marginalization in Finland despite their best efforts, some recognize a parallel to Estonia's treatment of its much more deeply rooted ethnic Russian population. Such an insight can be brushed off to avoid discomfort or become the foundation of a new critical perspective: both anti-immigrant populisms and solidarity movements arise from this kind of comparison.

Valeska Flor and Stefan Groth turn

from the world of mobility and choice to contexts of explicit metrics, ranking, and striving: now actors are less aware of comparing than of being compared. Flor's article considers a scaled-up arena in which not persons or nationalities but nation-states are the objects of comparison; they are similarly understood as singular, responsible agents. The 2015 Paris Agreement on Climate Change created a comparative framework that, in theory, would foster virtuous emulation and the adoption of "best practices" after mutual observation and reflective judgment. Reputational rewards might be accrued by good-faith compliance and the meeting of targets. In practice, as with other intergovernmental agreements demanding short-term sacrifice in a climate of scant trust between actors, comparison has more often been invidious, highlighting failure and, with longer-term comparison of past trajectories, assigning blame for the overall situation. As with the Estonian migrants, nation-states measure themselves defensively against significant others, and a hierarchy takes shape, "from model pupil to sinner." In this case, however, no one is performing well compared to the aspirational standard, so the deflection of responsibility takes priority.

At the activist level, on the other hand, identification trumps comparison: young people across the West do not simply cite Greta Thunberg's example but dress up to look like her.² In turn, this solidary platform provides the foundation for an invidious intergenerational comparison, as school strikers attempt to shame their (ir)responsible elders into action

Stefan Groth's article would appear to lower the stakes of the discussion, for he considers ethos at the level of individu-

als failing to win bike races rather than nation-states failing to secure the planet. Still, a comparison of microcosm and macrocosm does not come amiss, and transformations in the context of play may signal useful movements upstream. Games are, after all, both analytical tools and subjunctive spaces in which scenarios may be played out, informing consequential choices later (Noyes 2016). One has only to look at reality TV in the United States, with its various dramatizations of top-down comparison and zero-sum competition at the bottom, and observe how easily this ludic space has infiltrated the White House. The transformation imagined in Suzanne Collins' 2008 novel *The Hunger Games* feels closer than ever.

By contrast, Groth's amateur cyclists, with access to all the comparative instruments and metrics anyone could wish for, are unconcerned with absolute victory. Rather, they couple the "observing apparatus" to their own observations to achieve a purpose that is also their own: situating their performance goals within the range of a cohort defined by friendship or age grade. Affectively, his cyclists compare the enjoyment of sociable riding in the fresh air with the possibility of a modest personal triumph to the fruitless grind and inappropriate mimicry of striving to emulate the professional standard. If "invidious comparison" and "relative deprivation" among peers were the primary motivators of action in the modern era (Veblen 1899; Runciman 1966), here solidary comparison and relative achievement serve to animate effort.

A suspicious reader will see a failure of autonomy in this "orientation toward the middle." Rephrasing Bourdieu, it might seem these riders have chosen the

mediocrity that has already been chosen for them (1984). Bourdieu wrote, however, of a late bourgeois society in which not everyone was expected to win prizes. Today, by contrast, the treadmill of excellence keeps us all running toward the expectation of exceeding expectations. Groth's cyclists choose not to submit to the logic of a game they cannot win. If this stance is also informing the broader life projects of educated young people, as there is some multinational evidence to suggest, then it constitutes a meaningful rebellion against neoliberalism and, in comparison to that dominant logic, can be understood as an ethical choice to embrace the reality principle. Nation-states confronting hard decisions in the face of climate change might take note.

Notes

- 1 Pace Bourdieu, who argues for giving everyone the opportunity to detach from habitus and ascend into universals (1990). In contrast to much modern theory, modernist aesthetic practice was perhaps clearer in diagnosing the characteristic modern exit from habitus as the reflexivity provoked by the possibility of comparison: see the *Verfremdungseffekt* of Brechtian theatre and the Russian Formalist account of defamiliarization.
- 2 To be sure, established young activists in the global South cannot help comparing the international visibility of Thunberg to their own.

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