Comparing places

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Empirically grounded, anthropological comparisons like this one present an important opportunity to rethink what the comparative imagination can do for us in thinking across different contexts, writes **Jennifer Robinson** *in response to the previous post,* What are we comparing China with? *.*

I approached Charles Stafford's reflections on his fieldwork with great interest. In urban studies for some decades now, it has seemed perilous to seek to draw comparisons between China and the US, alongside an array of related taboos: third world cities and western cities seemed to have little in common, and while the socialist-capitalist comparison was more fully explored in the 1980s, this was not routinely thought a profitable direction for enquiry. Most systematic urban comparisons in fact compare very similar cities. For example, much comparative work has been done amongst and between US and European cities. On the other hand, at a more informal level, urban studies as a discipline has a fundamentally comparative turn of imagination – if one is seeking to build generalisations about the urban, they have to be able to reach beyond the individual case, as wider theoretical insights need to speak to more than one city. Also, the processes which we have imagined as shaping cities do tend to affect many cities around the world – economic crisis, changes in governance styles, architecture and urban design. Now, as the transformation of the landscape of global urbanisation has demanded a stronger orientation to cities in areas previously neglected by both systematic and more informal, routine comparativism, the need to re-interrogate comparative methods has become urgent.

How, then, can urbanists (and Charles in this blog), start to build comparative understandings through placing places, like China, which have been profoundly excluded from wider theoretical labour in the social sciences for some time, in close analytical proximity with those places which seem to be quite different? For although they were acceptable as a traditional focus of anthropological methods, and small rural settlements in China would have been brought into conversation with many other places in the world visited by anthropologists (through wider conceptual analysis and relating case studies through secondary literature), but Oklahoma was quite likely not on the anthropological repertoire until recently.

At a pragmatic level, comparisons rely on generating some analytical proximity between two (or more) places to justify thinking about them together. In urban studies this can very often be achieved through tracing the ways in which cities are practically interconnected through flows of people, resources and ideas: they can be thought together because of their common production. Also, quite often it would be a specific outcome, repeated across many cities, which would draw a comparative imagination – like high rise residential buildings, or mega urban developments, gated communities or transport systems. Thus, our understanding of the shared processes producing cities (such as investment flows, policy ideas and urban designers) will be strengthened through exploring more than one city; and our conceptualisations of the meaning of specific urban outcomes will be questioned through considering multiple, usually related, instances.

Charles' project is different from these tactics as it relies on generating a more conceptual proximity between two cases. He identifies phenomena which are shared by both places but which are not necessarily connected with one another: taking Heilongjiang, China, and Oklahoma, USA, he suggests that both places have experienced socio-economic change (growth and decline), although their specific trajectories are likely to be somewhat divergent, and both have families. He senses that families might have experienced a rise and fall in their significance with changing socio-economic fortunes in both places. In this case, the analytical proximities are not genetic (co-determined in their shared historical production or genesis) but generative (brought together by the ambition to generate and refine concepts). These are terms I develop from Gilles Deleuze's Difference and Repetition. In selecting the concepts, "family" and "socio-economic change" to explore across both contexts, Charles has cast his comparison at a very

abstract level, which seems appealing as then the two places seem eminently comparable – both have families, right?

However, the "abbreviation" (to follow Henri Lefebvre's Dialectical Materialism) or process of abstraction which generates these capacious terms, families, socio-economic change, leaves aside all the differences which characterise particular families, particular socio-economic contexts. This leaves differences unconceptualised. Conventionally in comparative thinking, different causal variables would be identified as interacting to explain variations in aspects of these terms, perhaps determining their different outcome in each place but keeping their wider conceptualisation intact, assuming their broadest meanings are somehow fixed and real. Nonetheless, I think the kind of anthropological comparative imagination that Charles Stafford brings to his "unusual" comparison proposes a different kind of way of thinking, which would see these wider concepts as radically revisable and would offer a different use for the case in comparison.

In their stark empirical differences, yet close conceptual proximity, these two cases invite deep reflection on concepts such as family, or practices of co-ordinating "goals, intentions and actions with others" (which immediately stretches the question beyond family for many). Empirically grounded, anthropological comparisons like this one present an important opportunity to rethink what the comparative imagination can do for us in thinking across different contexts. For example, interrogating abstract conceptualisations through bringing quite different cases together and stimulating conceptual interconnections across the cases can stretch existing assumptions about each case and can raise new kinds of questions as each interrogates the other. Charles indicates this possibility in bringing the intense public sociability of the Chinese case to the Oklahoma situation where home-based interviews occlude relevant but somewhat off-stage activities in churches and in private which resonate as sites of support and intimacy. Conceptualisations of what and where family is in each case can be reinvigorated by engagement with the other case. The resulting array (multiplicity) of possible ways of thinking family, which comparative work can illuminate, should offer an effective disturbance of singular, wider conceptualisations or abstractions, and might offer more useful and immediate conceptualisations, which could be put to work in further cases. Conceptualisations, then, would find inspiration from many different places, and would find grounds to bring even quite different cases together. Such anthropological comparisons can inspire other social sciences to move away from traditional causally driven comparative analyses, to ones which work with embedded historical processes and use comparison to promote a more sceptical approach to inherited, abstract concepts, seeking to display their multiple possibilities across different localities, rather than foreclose on conceptual innovation by postulating either invariant abstract categories, or their simple hybridisation in different places.

The reflections on the fieldwork also bring out some important differences in how the chosen field sites could be approached: one is lonely but productive of insights and the other full of sociability but leaving a rather foggy understanding, while both show gendered limits on accessing family life and wider support networks. In itself these comments are provocative, as they highlight the great variability in the meaning and consequences of shared social science research methods. In the reformatted comparativism I propose, this divergence would not undermine comparability, but enrich it. Thus the same techniques (such as ethnographic practices; or a single ethnographer) deployed in two different situations might well lead to divergence in focus and emphasis. This could be interpreted positively as multiplying comparative possibilities and bringing quite different insights to the fore in each case, which might be of benefit to understanding the other case.

About the Author

Jennifer Robinson is Professor of Human Geography at the Department of Geography, University College London. Her book, Ordinary Cities (Routledge, 2006) developed a post-colonial critique of urban studies. This project has been taken forward in her call to reinvent comparative urbanism for global urban studies (in IJURR, 2011). Current projects include exploring transnational aspects of Johannesburg and London's policy making processes.

Editor's Note

This posting is based on the author's contribution to a panel discussion at the workshop held in June 2013, "Addressing Field Research Constraints in China", and is a response to Charles Stafford's contribution, What are we comparing China with? published earlier.