Methodological Appendix

Making Global Comparison Possible?

FILIPE CALVÃO AND MATTHIEU BOLAY

While cross-cultural comparative approaches seem to be increasingly utilized across disciplines, this volume both explores and problematizes the purpose, aim, and methods underpinning the comparison of a global value such as transparency. The volume is based on research in disparate locations of the world – from European boardrooms and expert laboratories, Malagasy vanilla plantations to Indian tea auction rooms, Mozambican ruby mining to approaches to future resource extraction in Greenland. In its ensemble, the volume does more than bring empirical specificity to disparate geographies of supply chains; instead, the comparative effort seeks to assess the processes and forms of mediation enacting transparency in ideas, objects, and practices. As such, the contributions mobilize comparative effort to examine a similar object – the ideological and aspirational goal of transparency and its attendant practices, which are produced through variously different forms: technological, qualitative, institutional.

Moreover, the comparative method was applied flexibly as an evolutive, concurrent, and interconnected process. This means that, in order to assess how transparency regiments the global production and circulation of commodities and political discourse, each contribution attends to the conditions underpinning the making and construction of transparency as a total social fact organizing contemporary life. In the sociological and anthropological approach that lies at the core of this volume, the comparative method was developed through ethnographic engagement with specific institutional practices and intellectual paradigms. Concretely, this meant that anticipatory and preparatory discussion developed an initial set of questions, which were reformulated and refined in a first workshop organized in Geneva in June 2019. During this phase of the project, serious consideration was given to the data generated by different techniques of knowledge production and their embedded epistemological, ethical, and theoretical assumptions. In the unstable relationships of practices,

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 11 Nov 2026 at 20:34:08, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009605243.018

representations, and production, our comparative approach was used to trace, commensurate, and render visible the making of transparency.

However, for a comparison to be possible, one needs to start from the assumption of discrete entities. Keen to avoid an essentialist and reductionist vision of transparency, the volume chose to focus on the terms of a processual relation: not defining what contexts and practices exude "transparency," but how something can be deemed *transparent*, and what the terms are of its relation to the opposite cognates of opacity and secrecy and in the broader context of capital and knowledge on a global scale. In Saussurean terms, this implied seeking the comparative position of transparency in a broader system of values rendered meaningful through relation to each other. The value of transparency, thus, can be made perceptible only in relation to other terms in a total system of meaningful distinction and contrast. In so doing, to follow Appadurai's (1996) suggestion of moving from culture-as-noun to cultural-the-adjective, one steps into a more germane "realm of differences, contrast, and comparisons."

While comparison is at the core of the anthropological project, the very possibility that ethnographies could be comparable has been the object of debates since the institutionalization of the discipline. This paradox, already pointed out in E. E. Evans-Pritchard's famous aphorism that anthropology's "only method, the comparative method . . . is impossible" (see Candea 2019), tends to be addressed either by emphasizing the specificity of cases and dismissing comparison as naïve positivism, or by reclaiming more methodological efforts to make cases comparable. Such positions reflect longstanding epistemological divides between inductive and hypothetico-deductive approaches – or the study of processes irreducible to singled-out variables on the one hand, and the study of variables' dependent causations on the other.

The ethnography of global processes intended in this volume inevitably raises questions of scale, both vertical and horizontal. Is it about zooming from "10,000 feet up" down to specific and particularly illustrative sites, as in Michael Burawoy's extended case method (2009), or about tracking processes spreading across various sites, as in Anna Tsing's ethnographies of "global connections" (2005)? This volume does not intend to formulate answers or methodological prescriptions regarding what would be the best scalar practices for studying a global social value. Yet, the multisited ethnographies in this volume propose an illustration of an in-between approach, which is

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 11 Nov 2026 at 20:34:08, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009605243.018

particularly suitable for analyzing the multifold manifestations and meanings of transparency as it is constructed and interpreted across commodities' global production networks.

The pervasive expansion of "global supply chains" as a determining feature of contemporary capitalism (Sassen 2014, Tsing 2009) rendered multisite approaches inevitable in order to understand the connections and disconnections they enable on a global scale. In his seminal essay, George Marcus insisted that "multisited ethnography [was] not a different kind of controlled comparison ... generated for homogeneously conceived units"; rather, it was a nonlinear tracking effort where "comparison emerges from putting questions to an emergent object of study whose contours, sites, and relationships are not known beforehand" (Marcus 1995: 102). Global supply chains typically produce unpredictive trajectories not only of commodities in motion, but of the concepts that regiment their circulation. In this context, our approach to transparency does not intend to compare its degree of implementation across predefined sites or stages of production, but rather to track the nonpredictive trajectories of how this traveling concept is constituted across global supply chains.

We take the concept of mediation to be critical in this approach. In fact, the objects, representations, and technologies of transparency move through nonlinear paths, often punctuated by impasses, around "nodes of mediation." For William Mazzarella (2004: 352), "nodes of mediation" can be defined as "sites at which the compulsions of institutional determination and the rich, volatile play of sense come into always provisional alignment in the service of ... a vast range of social projects, from the grass roots to corporate boardrooms." The language of nodes is deployed in the volume to emphasize how these physical and conceptual sites are connected, not in terms of the "'actual' interconnections of 'things' but the conceptual interconnections of problems" (Weber 1949).

While we retain the image of (global production) *networks* for heuristic purposes, the *nodes* we identify are not those of well-separated stages of production connecting things, but those of mediation connecting concepts. From the perspective of a commodity lifespan, transparency does not therefore map easily onto a qualitative state, comparable and measurable on a transparency–opacity continuum, but onto various moments and locations where it engages mediations toward *disclosure*, *immediacy*, *trust*, and *truth*. These four

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 11 Nov 2026 at 20:34:08, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009605243.018

core concepts relate to different dimensions of transparency that respectively convoke valuation practices, technical expertise, bureaucratic legibility, and truth narratives – and each of these nodes illustrates one form of mediating a commodity across meaning and value. These concepts enable us to compare how transparency works, not *against* predefined isolated variables (such as states, institutions, or stages of production), but *from within* the perspective of commodities' engagement with concurrent processes of making them transparent. Thereby, while we do not compare homogeneously conceived units identified "beforehand," we are able to compare the works of disclosure, immediacy, trust, and truth deployed in the making of transparency.

Taking inspiration from authors who have reconceptualized "the field" as an assemblage of the multiple spaces traversed by ideas and interlocutors (Gupta and Ferguson 1997; Ong and Collier 2005), contributors to this volume scrutinize the ethnographic production of knowledge in the politics and relations between proximity and distance, "here and there," "up" and "out" (Clarke 2004; Hannerz 2003; Marcus 1995; Nader 1969). In doing so, we pave the way for comparative research across disparate regions of the globe around one key, defining global value by way of a relational and contextual approach to transparency. Ultimately, this forces a rethinking of scale-making projects in the multidimensionality of capitalist spatiality by paying attention to how the particular scale of transparency interacts with, transgresses, or extends other global values, from property to the nation, sustainability, and development. This examination of a global value such as transparency is only made possible by way of rich, fine-grained research into the grounded social worlds that produce and enable it, as well as the empirical and conceptual movements between and across different forms of transparency. This volume, accordingly, ensures that this global comparative method generates rigorous, verifiable, and reliable data, critically overcoming the sense of geographic and cultural distance that has dominated our disciplines for so long.

Bibliography

Appadurai, Arjun. 1996. *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 11 Nov 2026 at 20:34:08, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009605243.018

Burawoy, Michael. 2009. *The Extended Case Method: Four Countries, Four Decades, Four Great Transformations, and One Theoretical Tradition*. Oakland: University of California Press.

Candea, Matei. 2019. *Comparison in Anthropology: The Impossible Method*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Clarke, Kamari Maxine. 2004. *Mapping Yorùbá Networks: Power and Agency in the Making of Transnational Communities*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Gupta, Akhil and James Ferguson. 1997. *Anthropological Locations: Boundaries and Grounds of a Field Science*. Oakland: University of California Press.

Hannerz, Ulf. 2003. "Being There … and There … and There! Reflections on Multi-Site Ethnography." *Ethnography* 4 (2): 201–216.

Marcus, George E. 1995. "Ethnography in/of the World System: The Emergence of Multi-Sited Ethnography." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 24 (1): 95–117.

Mazzarella, William. 2004. "Culture, Globalization, Mediation." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 33: 345–367.

Nader, Laura. 1969. "Up the Anthropologist: Perspectives Gained from 'Studying Up'." In *Reinventing Anthropology*, edited by Dell H. Hymes, pp. 284–311. New York: Random House.

Ong, Aihwa and Stephen J. Collier (eds.). 2005. *Global Assemblages: Technology, Politics, and Ethics as Anthropological Problems*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.

Sassen, Saskia. 2014. *Expulsions: Brutality and Complexity in the Global Economy*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Tsing, Anna L. 2005. *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

2009. "Supply Chains and the Human Condition." *Rethinking Marxism* 21 (2): 148–176.

Weber, Max. 1949. "'Objectivity' in Social Science and Social Policy." In *The Methodology of the Social Sciences*, translated and edited by Edward A. Shils and Henry A. Finch, pp. 49–111. Glencoe, IL: Free Press.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 11 Nov 2026 at 20:34:08, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009605243.018