

Modeling Diversity, Comparability, and Change

Transformations of Evolutionism and the Comparative Method in French Ethnography After 1900 (Victor Segalen)

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Abstract *This paper examines models and modeling practices that emerge in the context of modern ethnographic-ethnological knowledge production in their relation to historical change. First, its focus is on evolutionist models of knowledge that arise in the 19th century in the context of the “comparative method” and describe cultural diversity in terms of historical change. Second, using Victor Segalen’s Essai sur l’exotisme as an example, it explores the extent to which the gradual replacement of classical evolutionism at the beginning of the 20th century causes the emergence of new comparisons. It is argued that this situation gives rise to significant changes in comparative models and modeling, in which a fundamental historical change takes place that affects the modern formation of knowledge as a whole.*

Introduction: Ethnographic Knowledge Formation, Modeling, and Change

In the period between the 18th and 20th centuries, an extensive ethnographic and scientific knowledge of the world as well as of the cultural, linguistic, and ethnic diversity of humankind emerges in Europe, which is closely related to the progressive exploration, measuring and appropriation of non-European territories and peoples. In the course of this “politics of world exploration”¹ characterizing modernity, a complex knowledge formation arises in France around 1900, which is marked by the close exchange of ethnographically oriented travel literature, comparative sciences, and academic ethnology. This knowledge formation draws on diverse practices of comparison and associated knowledge models in which foreign territories, societies, and human groups, in their cultural or ethnic variability, are related to each other and to Europe.

1 On the concept of the “politics of world exploration” cf. Philippe Despoix, *Die Welt vermessen. Dispositive der Entdeckungsreise im Zeitalter der Aufklärung*, Göttingen 2007, 11.

The comparative operations, knowledge models, and modeling practices underlying this knowledge formation are inextricably linked to phenomena and processes of historical change. This connection is revealed, on the one hand, in the way models and modeling practices relate to the empirical world. Models can be understood as media that provide indispensable frames of reference for understanding and knowing the world.² They acquire a special epistemic and heuristic value by constituting formalized representations that develop their own ordering patterns and arrangements, which reduce the diversity and complexity of the phenomenal world and thus ensure its intelligibility and meaningfulness. In this perspective, models function as means for structuring and ordering data and information, which enable a basic orientation in the real world. This ordering function characterizes in particular the influential evolutionist model of knowledge, which emerged in the 19th century in the context of the development of the so-called “comparative method” in different disciplines of knowledge (such as biology, linguistics and ethnology) and which essentially seeks to describe and explain the diversity and variability of human modes of existence, life and language forms via processes of stadial change and universal stages of cultural and ethnic development.³ The evolutionist knowledge model thus provides an overarching heuristic frame of reference that permits us to grasp the close connection established during the 19th century between various sciences, as well as between diverse practices of comparison, manifestations of human diversity, and phenomena of historical change.

On the other hand, in the transition from the 19th to the 20th century, historical change is revealed in the significant transformations of knowledge models and their underlying comparative practices. At the beginning of the 20th century, the critical-productive discussion of the comparative method and its modeling of cultural developments and transformations not only characterizes North American and British anthropology,⁴ but also informs the academic debates in France. It is situated, there, within the framework of a specific knowledge formation, which is marked by the comparatively late establishment of anthropology or ethnology as an independent academic discipline. This process of academic “professionalization” is closely linked to the founding of the *Institut d’ethnologie de Paris* at the Sorbonne by Marcel Mauss,

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- 2 For a concise account of models and their functions with respect to knowledge production see in more detail the introduction to the present volume, cf. also Mary S. Morgan, *The World in the Model. How Economists Work and Think*, Cambridge 2012, esp. chap 10, 378–412.
 - 3 On the comparative method and the evolutionist model of stadial change, cf. Devin Griffiths, *The Comparative Method and the History of the Humanities*, in: *History of the Humanities* 2 (2/2017), 473–505; cf. also Angus Nicholl’s contribution in the present volume.
 - 4 On the different denominations of the disciplines prevailing in France, Great Britain and the US cf. James Clifford, *On Ethnographic Surrealism*, in: *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 23 (4/1981), 539–564, 542; on France cf. also Werner Petermann, *Die Geschichte der Ethnologie*, Wuppertal 2004, 796–834.

Paul Rivet, and Lucien Lévi-Bruhl in 1925, at a time when chairs of anthropology had already existed for a generation in the Anglo-American world.⁵ The particular situation in France owes much to the critical revision and amplification of the methods and objects of biologically oriented physical anthropology, which held a dominant position in France until 1900 and was increasingly supplemented in the first decades of the 20th century by the ethnographic study of the languages, local customs, and material artifacts of non-European cultures. At the same time, the French field is characterized by the integration of sociological methods and approaches, developed from the 1890s by Émile Durkheim and his disciples.⁶ Furthermore, the institutional establishment of ethnology in France is closely related to the reorganization, carried out during the late 1920s, of the *Musée d'Ethnographie du Trocadéro*, established in 1878. This led to the founding of the *Musée de l'Homme* in 1937, which served as the institutional site where the classification and ordering principles of the “science of man” were established as well as implemented. In addition to Mauss and Rivet, numerous ethnologists of the new generation—such as Alfred Métraux, Marcel Griaule or Maurice Leenhardt—were involved in the formation and development of the *Musée de l'Homme*.⁷

Moreover, as Claude Lévi-Strauss emphasized in his survey article “French Sociology” published in 1945,⁸ from the 1920s at the latest there was a close exchange between scientific ethnology, sociology and ethnographically influenced literature in France. On the one hand, after returning from fieldwork, numerous ethnologists—such as Métraux, Griaule, or Lévi-Strauss—published, in addition to their scientific studies, ethnographic books with autobiographical or literary traits which were closely interrelated with their ethnological work. These books do not primarily provide an alternative presentation or organization of ethnographic data, but aim at a redefinition of the relationship between observing ethnologist and observed object or even come to suggest—as paradigmatically illustrated by the best-known example, the autobiographical travelogue *Tristes Tropiques* (1955)

5 Cf. Alice L. Conklin, *In the Museum of Man. Race, Anthropology, and Empire in France, 1850–1950*, Ithaca/London 2013, 86–91.

6 On the role the *Institut d'ethnologie* played in the context of the establishment of ethnology as an academic discipline in France, cf. Petermann, *Die Geschichte der Ethnologie*, 813–815; cf. also Clifford, *On Ethnographic Surrealism*; Irene Albers, *Der diskrete Charme der Anthropologie. Michel Leiris' ethnologische Poetik*, Göttingen 2018, 205–210; on the formation of the discipline in the interplay between physical anthropology, sociology and ethnography, cf. the detailed account in Conklin, *In the Museum of Man*, 58–99.

7 On the importance of the *Musée de l'Homme* with respect to the development and establishment of French ethnology, cf. Clifford, *On Ethnographic Surrealism*; Conklin, *In the Museum of Man*, 100–144.

8 Cf. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *French Sociology*, in: Georges Gurvitch/Wilbert Moore (eds.), *Twentieth Century Sociology*, New York 1945, 503–537, with reference to the *Collège de Sociologie*.

by Claude Lévi-Strauss—a complete reorientation of the anthropological project itself, which in the case of Lévi-Strauss was accompanied by fundamental transformations in the approach of structural anthropology.⁹ At the same time, as early as 1900, an extensive body of travel literature published by a wide variety of writers (such as Victor Segalen, Blaise Cendrars, Raymond Roussel, Henri Michaux, et al.) began to appear, which in part drew on the French genre of the *voyage philosophique*, but above all on the traditions of European travel writing. The authors and literary travel reports were also often situated in the context of contemporary artistic avant-garde movements, such as abstract art or surrealism, in which new principles of representation and form, oriented toward non-European and “pre-modern” cultures, were developed. Numerous ethnologists such as André Schaeffner, Michel Leiris, and Griaule belonged to or were closely associated with these avant-garde movements.¹⁰

In contrast to Germany or the Anglo-American world, in France the close exchange between different actors, institutions, ways of writing, and forms of publication gave rise to a practice formation characterized by multiple interconnections,¹¹ which—because of the interweavings of ethnology, ethnography, and literature—clearly resists the simple juxtaposition of a “scientific culture” and a “literary culture.”¹² Highly complex forms and patterns of comparison-based knowledge production appear, which are marked by a critical-productive discussion of the specific “models” of evolutionary change that underlie 19th-century methods of comparison. At the same time, in the interplay of scientifically and aesthetically grounded comparative practices, they, in turn, also come to develop modeling practices that indicate and initiate processes of historical change which decisively shape the knowledge formation of the first half of the 20th century.

9 On the publication of “second books” by numerous French ethnologists, cf. the seminal study by Vincent Debaene, *L'adieu au voyage: L'ethnologie française entre science et littérature*, Paris 2010.

10 For a detailed account of the close connections between ethnography and surrealism, which are revealed, in particular, in the temporal continuity of the emergence of the avant-garde movement and the institutionalization of the scientific discipline, as well as in personal collaborations in the context of exhibition or publication projects, cf. notably Clifford, *On Ethnographic Surrealism*; for a critical discussion of Clifford's argument, which focuses in particular on the different attitudes toward French colonialism, cf. Jean Jamin, *L'ethnographie mode d'emploi. De quelques rapports de l'ethnologie avec le malaise dans la civilisation*, in: Jacques Hainard/Roland Kaehr (eds.), *Le mal et la douleur*, Neuchâtel 1986, 45–79.

11 On the implications underlying the term “practice formation,” cf. notably Frank Hillebrandt, *Die Soziologie der Praxis als post-strukturalistischer Materialismus*, in: Hilmar Schäfer (ed.), *Praxistheorie. Ein soziologisches Forschungsprogramm*, Bielefeld 2016, 71–93.

12 For a broad critical revision of the analytical opposition of these two cultures, such as that underlying Bourdieu's type of sociological field analysis, cf. Debaene, *L'adieu au voyage*, 11–42.

Starting from Franz Boas' influential critique of the comparative method, the present chapter will begin by undertaking a brief reconstruction of the discursive field of knowledge production, which in the 19th century characterized the emergence of "comparativism" in various knowledge disciplines of the humanities and sciences and equally marked the scientific as well as the literary reception of the "comparative method" in early 20th-century France. In a further step, the closer implications of this reception will be explored using the example of the *Essai sur l'exotisme* (1904–1919) written by the French writer Victor Segalen. It will be shown that Segalen's programmatic essay does not merely develop an aesthetic response to the encounter between Western and non-Western cultures and peoples, characterized by recourse to ethnographic classifications and categorizations; rather, it also functions as a discursive "intersection point" for different knowledge and comparative practices, whose co-presence points to conflicting models of the experience of linguistic, cultural, and ethnic "diversity." These comparative models paradigmatically reveal a reordering of ethnographic-ethnological knowledge production in modernity, a reordering which—according to the central argument put forward in this article—results from the failure of, or central shifts within, the previously prevailing comparative model of evolutionary change, which cause a significant change of the modern practice formation as a whole.

The Evolutionist Model of Change. Ethnology, Ethnography, and the Comparative Method before and after 1900

In terms of the history of science, the field of ethnographic-ethnological knowledge production during the 19th century is significantly marked by the emergence of the "comparative method," which developed in various individual sciences such as philology, linguistics, biology and anthropology, and which largely defines the self-understanding of Western modernity.¹³ The foundation of this method is characterized by a set of basic abstract assumptions, which from the beginning are connected with ideas of historical and evolutionary change. As is demonstrated already in the field of linguistics, comparisons do not primarily aim at typological classifications of the compared objects (*comparata*), but at the reconstruction of their genealogical origins and transformations, for which the idea of temporal development is central.

13 The emergence of the "comparative method" calls forth a comprehensive historical approach that does not view comparisons as cognitive or hermeneutical operations but as broader cultural practices carried out by historical and social actors and institutions in specific situational contexts; cf. Eleonora Rohland/Kirsten Kramer, Introduction. On "Doing Comparison"—Practices of Comparing, in: Eleonora Rohland et al. (eds.), *Contact, Conquest and Colonization. How Practices of Comparing Shaped Empires and Colonialism around the World*, New York 2020, 1–16; cf. also the introduction to the present volume.

At the same time, the genealogically oriented investigations combine with the search for general deep structures and law-like patterns underlying the changes of individual phenomena traced in the different subfields.¹⁴ These imply a progressive development from the simple to the complex, from the homogeneous to the heterogeneous, which presupposes a process of increasing differentiation and, by way of analogy, comes to closely unite the different fields of investigation of philology, biology, and linguistics.¹⁵

The central assumptions outlined here, which underlie the notion of broader evolutionist processes and are developed prior to or concurrently with Darwin's theory of natural selection, with which they are nonetheless not identical, can be understood to form the heuristic basis of a complex "model" of historical change that decisively shapes 19th-century scientific thought. As previously mentioned, models are distinguished by a specific organization of data that constitutes their particular "typicality" or representativeness with respect to natural or social objects of the world. Particularly in the form of "small-world accounts," they provide, on the one hand, representations or interpretations of the objects, many of which are closely related to concept-based ways of "theorizing" the world. On the other hand, they are based on rule-guided simplifications and form-based scale reductions, in which intricate social or scientific processes are condensed or "compressed," these ways of compressing guarantee the manageability of a reality that has become too complex to be grasped, and thus permit the operationalization of the models with regard to interventions, manipulations and transformations of the real world.¹⁶ Based on this definition, the forms of analysis and description that emerge in the context of the "comparative method" can be understood as expressions of a fundamental "evolutionist" model of historical change, founded in particular on the simplifying and reductive assumption of a linear progression grounded in causal relations; it not only implies the transition from simple to complex forms of organization, but in many cases simultaneously presupposes—as paradigmatically illustrated by Herbert Spencer's concept of progress—the transfer of organic processes conceived in botany or biology to the realm of social and cultural communities as described in ethnology and anthropology.¹⁷

14 On the emergence and the central theoretical premises underlying the comparative method in the humanities and social sciences, cf. the comprehensive overview in Griffiths, *The Comparative Method and the History of the Humanities*.

15 Cf. Angus Nicholls, Max Müller and the Comparative Method, in: *Comparative Critical Studies* 12 (2/2015), 213–234; cf. also Angus Nicholls' contribution in the present volume.

16 On these forms and functions of models, cf. in particular Morgan, *The World in the Model*, 378–412.

17 Cf. Herbert Spencer, *Progress. Its Law and Cause*, in: *Westminster Review* (January–April 1857), 445–485; (446); George W. Stocking, *Victorian Anthropology*, New York 1987; Matei

The particular historical significance that the model acquires within modern ethnology and anthropology emerges most clearly in the context of the fundamental critique formulated by Franz Boas in the article “The Limitations of the Comparative Method” published in 1896, which begins with a definition of the discipline’s position: “Modern anthropology has discovered the fact that human society has grown and developed everywhere in such a manner that its forms, its opinions and its actions have many fundamental traits in common.”¹⁸ Boas’ critique is directed against the notion of historical and cultural change advocated in 19th-century British and German anthropology by Herbert Spencer, Edward Burnett Tylor, John Lubbock, and the followers of Adolf Bastian, which presupposes a uniform human development,¹⁹ and is based on the universalistic assumption that the appearance of similar cultural phenomena (such as rites, linguistic forms, or pictorial designs) conditions the same development of these phenomena in all places of the world.²⁰ Indeed, as Tylor points out in the first chapter of *Primitive Culture*, he is not concerned with the mere comparative description of genealogical relations between cultures and societies, but with the search for overarching universal “laws” firmly embedded in the psyche and thought of humanity, laws that transcend any idiosyncratic historical circumstance.²¹ The teleological stadial model of human evolution associated with these laws explains differences between peoples and societies by different rates of development, assuming that European cultures have developed at a faster speed than non-European peoples and “races,” which are therefore located in earlier evolutionary stages of political, social and technological development. This “classical” evolutionist model is thus based on a specific “economy of time” that contrasts the modern experience of the accelerated historicity of Europeans with “primitive” non-Europeans who—although seen to be “without history”—are paradoxically viewed as representing the common origin of the historical development of both civilizations.²² The evolutionist model became widespread in the 19th century, including in France. It appears in particular in the context of the

Candea, *Comparison in Anthropology. The Impossible Method*. Cambridge 2019, notably 64–67; cf. also Angus Nicholls’ contribution in the present volume.

- 18 Franz Boas, The Limitations of the Comparative Method of Anthropology. In: *Science* 103 (4/1896), 901–908, 901.
- 19 On the British tradition, cf. Stocking, *Victorian Anthropology*, 170.
- 20 Cf. Boas, The Limitations of the Comparative Method of Anthropology, 904.
- 21 Cf. Edward B. Tylor, *Primitive Culture. Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Art, and Custom*, Cambridge 2010 [1871], 1–22; cf. also Griffiths, The Comparative Method and the History of the Humanities, 484.
- 22 On the figure of the “primitive” as an expression of a modern evolutionist “economy of time,” cf. Erhard Schüttelpelz, *Die Moderne im Spiegel des Primitiven. Weltliteratur und Ethnologie (1870–1960)*, München 2005, 392–400; with reference to Fabian who views the figure of the “primitive” less as an empirical object than a “categorical order,” cf. Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other. How Anthropology Makes its Object*, New York 1983, 18; on the modern his-

“physical anthropology” and “racial science” advocated by the physician Paul Broca, which, during the second half of the century, approached the problem of human variability on a scientific and positivist basis within the framework of quantitative craniological and osteological studies. Yet it was also taken up within the broader debates surrounding the “natural history” of humankind, pursued by the influential naturalist and zoologist Quatrefages de Bréau at the *Musée d'Histoire naturelle* during the same period, as well as forming the basis of the neo-Lamarckian assumptions of inferior and superior “races” that underlie the ethnographic studies of Jules Ernest-Théodore Hamy, the founding director of the *Musée de l'Ethnographie du Trocadéro*.²³

Classical evolutionism displays numerous variations in the context of the “natural history” of humankind. These variations are revealed, for example, in the co-presence of monogenetic and polygenetic models of the origin of mankind, in the simultaneous acceptance or rejection of the continuity of biological and social phenomena, and in the alternating inclusion or denial of the influence of environmental and climatic factors on the development of peoples and “races.”²⁴ Yet despite these variations, it is a model of comparison that, in the 19th century, is omnipresent in Europe. The viability of this model is based on the use of temporalizing comparisons, which place the peoples, languages or “races” being compared on a universal, hierarchically interpreted scale of progress. Due to the postulation of the assumption of a “uniform” humanity, the normative model can be interpreted as an attempt to deliberately control and tame the abundance and diversity of collected ethnographic data and information discovered in the course of the European “world exploration politics” during the 18th and beginning of the 19th century, by referring back to an overarching standard of comparison. Both the allocation of the compared objects (*comparata*) and the selection of the comparative grounds (*tertia*) thus reveal a tendency to homogenize and discipline the multiplying objects of comparing, thereby assigning a fundamental ordering function to comparison with regard to contemporary ethnographic-ethnological knowledge production.

As paradigmatically illustrated by the critique of the comparative method formulated by Boas, after 1900, the evolutionist model of knowledge and comparison experienced a crisis. This critique, however, does not imply an overcoming of the procedure of comparison itself. Although Boas opposes generalizing comparisons,

torical “experience of acceleration,” cf. Reinhart Koselleck, *Zeitschichten. Studien zur Historik*, Frankfurt am Main 2000.

23 On the traditions of French anthropology in the 19th century, cf. the extensive account provided in Conklin, *In the Museum of Man*, 24–57; Claude Blanckaert, *De la race à l'évolution. Paul Broca et l'anthropologie française, 1850–1900*, Paris 2009; Nélia Dias, *Le Musée d'Ethnographie du Trocadéro (1878–1908). Anthropologie et muséologie en France*, Paris 1991.

24 On these variants, cf. Conklin, *In the Museum of Man*, 42–43; cf. also Stocking, *Victorian Anthropology*; H. Lowie, *The History of Ethnological Theory*, New York 1937, chapter 3, 4, and 7.

which combine the deductive assumption of the uniform development of humankind according to universal laws (and according to overarching similarities) with the idea of the superiority of Europeans over non-European peoples and civilizations, he does not abandon comparison completely. Instead, he demands an inductive comparative approach borrowed from history, which is guided by the local environments of singular or particular rites, customs or language forms and their respective geographical distributions.²⁵ At the same time, he calls for a critical examination of whether and to what extent observed phenomena or peoples can serve at all as adequate *comparata* for ethnological comparisons. For Boas, it is a question of the conditions of possibility of “comparability” itself:

We cannot say that the occurrence of the same phenomenon is always due to the same causes, and that thus it is proved that the human mind obeys the same laws everywhere. We must demand that the causes from which it developed be investigated and that comparisons be restricted to those phenomena which have been proved to be effects of the same causes. [...] In short, before extended comparisons are made, the comparability of the material must be proved.²⁶

Subsequently to Boas, the comparative method and the associated evolutionist model experienced a very heterogeneous reception. In the English-speaking world, a major rift developed in the 20th century between empirically oriented American “cultural anthropologists” (such as Ruth Benedict or Margaret Mead) and British “armchair anthropologists.” While the former focus on internal explanation and extensive fieldwork and dismiss evolutionism, British anthropologists such as W.H.R. Rivers or Alfred Radcliffe-Brown follow Tylor’s approach of comparing recorded data, from which more general regularities or patterns of cultural development continue to be derived.²⁷

25 Cf. Boas, *The Limitations of the Comparative Method*, 905: “We have another method, which in many respects is much safer. A detailed study of customs in their bearings to the total culture of the tribe practicing them, and in connection with an investigation of their geographical distribution among neighboring tribes, afford us almost always a means of determining with considerable accuracy the historical causes that led to the formation of the customs in question and to the psychological processes that were at work in their development.” On the foundation of Boas’ “historical” methodology, cf. also Can-dea, *Comparison in Anthropology*, 75–78; Fred Eggan, *Social Anthropology and the Method of Controlled Comparison*, in: *American Anthropologist* 56 (5/1954), 743–763, esp. 749–750; Richard Handler, *The Uses of Incommensurability in Anthropology*, in: *New Literary History* 40 (3/2009), 627–647, esp. 631–33.

26 Boas, *The Limitations of the Comparative Method*, 904.

27 Cf. concisely Griffiths, 485–486.

A more complex situation arises in France, where different institutions, actors, and discourses of knowledge interact after 1900. Here, scientific debates are characterized—in a broader sense than called for by Boas—by a critical testing of the comparability of the objects compared, which equally affects questions concerning the selection and definition of objects (*comparata*) and comparative grounds (*tertia*) in the disciplines of anthropology, sociology, and ethnology, as well as questions about the actors of comparison and the fundamental relation established between observers and observed peoples or communities. While physical anthropology as “racial science” continued to be based on evolutionism and its normative categorizations, significant changes occur in Durkheimian sociology as well as in the subsequent approaches of emerging ethnology and anthropology. Thus Durkheim as well as Lévi-Strauss continue to adhere to the comparative method as well as to the principle of deductive generalization in the founding of sociology and “structural anthropology.”²⁸ Furthermore, the evolutionary perspective still determines (in increasingly non-linear variants) the research carried out by Mauss and partially also by Rivet.²⁹ However, these approaches are characterized on the one hand by a redefinition of the general laws, which in Durkheim and Mauss are no longer psychologically but socially based and—in reversing the organic analogy of evolutionism—now identify the organization of society as the model for the classificatory order of the natural world.³⁰ On the other hand, they are distinguished by the deliberate abandonment or reversal of normative hierarchizations as well as by the use of “symmetrizing” comparative practices. These new comparative practices are based on the creation of a fundamental compatibility between cultural characteristics of the observer and the observed, and in many cases perform an exegetical extension or de facto adoption of local indigenous forms of thought and institutions (such as “totem,” “mana,” “taboo,” or “hau”) into their own ethnological category formations. Moreover, these new methods increasingly enter into productive exchange with the empirical and descriptive techniques of ethnography, which in its analytical and comparative oper-

28 Cf. Émile Durkheim, *Les règles de la méthode sociologique*, Paris 1907, 169; on Durkheim and Lévi-Strauss, cf. also Griffiths, *The Comparative Method*, 482; Philippe Descola, *Anthropological Comparatisms. Generalisation, Symmetrisation, Bifurcation*, in: Renaud Gagné/Simon Goldhill/Geoffrey E.R. Lloyd (eds.), *Regimes of Comparatism: Frameworks of Comparison in History, Religion and Anthropology*, Leiden/Boston 2019, 402–417, esp. 404–405; the importance of the principle of generalization for comparison is also emphasized by Lévi-Strauss himself, cf. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Anthropologie structurale*, Paris 1958, 34: “Ce n’est pas la comparaison qui fonde la généralisation, mais le contraire.”

29 On Mauss, who, like Durkheim, advocated a functionalist variant of evolutionism, cf. Candea, *Comparison in Anthropology*, 69–70; cf. also Conklin, *In the Museum of Man*, 71–75 (on Mauss), 64–68 (on Rivet).

30 Cf. Petermann, *Die Geschichte der Ethnologie*, 815–819.

ations proves to be interested in the historical particularity of communities rather than in the general laws of their development.³¹

It is important to emphasize that the co-presence of these divergent approaches decisively shape the formation of the French “science of man,” especially in confrontation with physical anthropology (and “race theory”), thereby indicating its intermediate position between natural sciences, humanities and social sciences. This particular position reveals significant transformations undergone by the comparative practices that are employed in the scientific disciplines. While the universalizing comparisons underlying evolutionism or structural anthropology function as mere confirmation of preceding deductive generalizations that do not develop any productivity of their own in terms of the knowledge production associated with them, the situation changes in the context of the newly emerging ethnology. As is illustrated, for example, by Paul Rivet’s Americanist studies, here, new forms of comparative and collaborative “multilevel research” were conceived as early as 1910, which developed from the programmatic interweaving of the disciplines of archaeology, geography, linguistics, physical anthropology and ethnography. In terms of method, these new modes of comparison aimed at a systematic linking of *tertia* from the previously mentioned fields that conferred to the resulting “complex” and “connective” comparisons a fundamentally “productive” or “explorative” potential with regard to new knowledge spaces.³² The co-presence of different approaches as well as the institutional and discursive combination of various branches of science thus identifies French ethnology after 1900 as a disciplinary site where, through continual redefinitions of *comparata* (cultures, peoples, “races”) as well as through new allocations of (linguistic, physical, social, or environmental) *tertia*, routinized comparative descriptions and unifying explanatory patterns are increasingly put to the test.

This critical and experimental gesture appears even more distinctly in the ethnographical and autobiographical reports presented by ethnologists such as Griaule or Métraux as well as in the travelogues written by literary authors such as Victor Segalen, Blaise Cendrars, and Henri Michaux, in whose comparisons between Europe and various non-European cultures or colonies (belonging to Africa, Latin America, Oceania, or Asia) different “explorative” procedures are employed,

31 On these symmetrisations, which can be equally found in ethnological studies (for example, by Mauss and Lévi-Strauss) and in ethnographically based works (for example, by Maurice Leenhardt and Marcel Griaule), cf. Descola, *Anthropological Comparativisms*, 405–413.

32 On the methodological reflections dedicated to these ‘complex’ comparative practices in the context of Rivet’s Americanist Studies, cf. Conklin, *In the Museum of Man*, 65–68; on Mauss’ “unthought-of comparisons” that come to suspend self-evident cultural hierarchies and to shift habitual perception schemes, cf. Lévi-Strauss, *French Sociology*, 527. On ‘explorative’ comparisons, cf. Ulrike Davy et al., *Grundbegriffe für eine Theorie des Vergleichens. Ein Zwischenbericht. Working Paper 3 des SFB 1288*, Bielefeld 2019, [<http://doi.org/10.4119/unibi/2939563>].

by means of which the “comparability” of cultural phenomena itself turns out to be the central object of continued exploration and investigation.

In France, the crisis of the comparative method and the shifts in the classical evolutionist model thus produce—according to the central argument advanced in this paper—new comparative models and modeling practices, which mark significant displacements, overlaps or interferences of competing knowledge practices (for example from the fields of natural history, biology, psychology, etc.). These new comparative models emerge from ethnology and ethnographic literature, as well as from the interplay between museums, academic research, and artistic practice. They form multiple “cohabitations”³³ that come to explore the zones of comparability of different communities, ethnicities or environments that were already called for by Boas. Ultimately, in their interplay, they enable and produce a historical change of models of human diversity, which would not be formulable without the scientific method of comparison—and which will be paradigmatically pursued in the following, using the example of the theoretical definition of exoticism proposed by Victor Segalen.

Modeling Diversity: Victor Segalen's *Essai sur l'exotisme*

The complex conditions of ethnographic-ethnological model-building, which in France shape the discussion of the evolutionist comparative model of cultural change and human diversity within the practice formation of modernity, can be traced in a paradigmatic and condensed form in Victor Segalen's *Essai sur l'exotisme*. Segalen was a French naval physician, archaeologist, and writer. He undertook extensive travels to Tahiti, Java, Djibouti, China, and Japan, among other places, and is now considered one of the most important French travel writers of the first half of the 20th century. The programmatic *Essai*, which is a collection of fragmentary reflections and excerpts from a wide variety of literary, philosophical, and scientific texts, as well as sketches and notes, was written between 1904 and 1919. Although it presents itself as a contribution to an “aesthetics of diversity,” it is by no means limited to the paradigm of the arts and literature but can be read as a comprehensive comparative model of human variability that refers both to the comparative knowledge practices and models of the 19th century and to the beginnings of ethnology in the 20th century.

The heuristic starting point for the programmatic definition of the concept of exoticism, which is specified in a series of loosely linked comments and reflections, is its etymological meaning:

33 Cf. Philippe Descola, *Par delà nature et culture*, Paris 2005, 11.

Définition du préfixe *Exo* dans sa plus grande généralisation possible. Tout ce qui est “en dehors” de l’ensemble de nos faits de conscience actuels, quotidiens – tout ce qui n’est pas notre “Tonalité mentale” coutumière —³⁴

Definition of the prefix *Exo* in the most general sense possible. Everything that lies “outside” the sum total of our current, conscious everyday events, everything that does not belong to our usual “Mental Tonality.”³⁵

Exoticism presents itself here as a comparative constellation that relates the self to that which is situated “outside” its horizon of experience. Accordingly, it is a comparative figuration that replaces temporal comparisons with comparisons that are primarily spatial, therefore lacking a temporal index in the definition of “diversity.” Even if, at the beginning of the *Essai*, a parallelism in the treatment of time and space is postulated,³⁶ and an equal status of the foundation of exoticism in both dimensions of experience is suggested,³⁷ it is primarily the topological relation of exteriority that grounds exoticism. In this way, Segalen’s approach reveals that the temporal orientation underlying the evolutionist model of the comparative method is already clearly dismissed in the basic definition of “diversity.”

Notwithstanding the extension of the semantic range of meanings attached to the term, which is associated in the text with a wide variety of scientific, philosophical, and literary authors and movements,³⁸ the essay continues to identify exoticism as a comparative model of knowledge that has its fixed place within the ethnographic-ethnological formation of knowledge based on comparisons of Europe with distant, non-European cultures, peoples, and languages. Exoticism also critically engages with premises and implications inherent in the comparative method and its underlying evolutionist model. The grounding of the concept within this configuration of knowledge is attested, in particular, by the repeated argumentative shift from the basic topological constellation to topographical configurations, which, despite the polemical rejection of descriptions of “diversity” on the basis of its manifes-

34 The French text is quoted according to the following edition: Victor Segalen, *Essai sur l'exotisme*, in: Victor Segalen, *Oeuvres*, vol. 2, ed. by Christian Doumet/Adrien Cavallaro/Andrea Schellino, Paris 2020, 701–802, see 705.

35 The English translation is from Victor Segalen, *Essay on Exoticism. An Aesthetics of Diversity*, transl. and ed. by Yaël Rachel Schlick, Durham/London 2002, 37.

36 Cf. Segalen, *Essai sur l'exotisme*, 747 [Essay on Exoticism, 13].

37 Segalen, *Essai sur l'exotisme*, 714: “L'exotisme n'est pas seulement donné dans l'espace, mais également en fonction du temps” cf. Segalen, *Essay on Exoticism*, 18: “Exoticism does not only exist in space, but is equally dependent on time.”

38 Cf. notably Charles Forsdick, *Defining the Exotic. Exoticism as an Approach to Radical Diversity*, in: Charles Forsdick (ed.), *Victor Segalen and the Aesthetics of Diversity: Journeys between Cultures*, Oxford 2000, 23–57.

tations “in climates, fauna, and flora,”³⁹ identifies geography to be the fundamental paradigm and the measuring of the topographical world by longitude and latitude as the methodological starting point for defining exoticism:

Bref, j'étudierai ici l'Exotisme Géographique –

Deux grandes directives, selon que l'on se meut sur les méridiens ou sur les parallèles ; selon que l'on marche d'un des pôles vers l'équateur, ou bien que l'on progresse selon les parallèles – Je nommerai le premier l'Exotisme géographique en Latitude ; le second, l'exotisme géographique en Longitude. Si l'on monte ou descend, c'est l'exotisme en altitude.⁴⁰

In brief, I will examine geographic exoticism here.

Two main trajectories, depending on whether one moves along the meridians or the parallels; depending on whether one moves from one of the poles toward the equator or along the parallels. I will call the first geographical Exoticism in latitude and the second geographical Exoticism in longitude. If one climbs or descends, it is an exoticism in altitude.⁴¹

In light of this geographical definition of exoticism based on the trajectories of travel expeditions, it seems consequent that the essay repeatedly refers to various paradigms of travel literature, ranging from Marco Polo to 19th-century colonial literature, and identifies the figure of the traveler to be the prototype of the “exot.”⁴² The text thus anticipates that travel and exploration narratives by European explorers such as Mungo Park, James Cook, Louis-Antoine de Bougainville, or Richard Burton, both before and after the advent of empirical fieldwork, with their central tropes would provide an important model for the writing projects of ethnographers and ethnologists (such as Lévi-Strauss or Griaule).⁴³ Even if fieldwork cannot be fully identified with voyages, it is the irreducible singularity of the traveler's experience that guarantees the perception of the ethnographic particularity and difference of the peoples and civilizations observed, which cannot be grasped through the deductive generalizations of the comparative method of anthropology. Implicitly, the *Essai* also shows that the travel reports by explorers of the 18th and 19th centuries such as Cook, Bougainville, or Humboldt, with their empirical comparisons, played a decisive role in the production and dissemination of scientific knowledge about foreign geographical territories and cultures, which emerged in the context of

39 Segalen, *Essai sur l'exotisme*, 762 [Essay on Exoticism, 66].

40 Segalen, *Essai sur l'exotisme*, 763.

41 Segalen, *Essay on Exoticism*, 66.

42 Cf. Segalen, *Essai sur l'exotisme*, 715 [Essay on Exoticism, 20].

43 Cf. Debaene, *L'adieu au voyage*, 25 (on Lévi-Strauss), 207 (on Griaule).

Europe's "politics of world exploration."⁴⁴ Although the comparative descriptions of non-European landscapes and their indigenous inhabitants contained in these travel reports are in many cases firmly rooted in the classification systems of natural history,⁴⁵ they in turn supply important empirical evidence and data for the disciplines of geography, natural history, and anthropology, thus endowing comparative practices with a genuinely productive potential that contributes significantly to the expansion and transformation of existing scientific ordering systems.

In Segalen's essay, however, travel literature by no means provides a heuristic ethnographic model of knowledge that, by means of productive ethnographic comparisons and in opposition to the abstract generalizations of the comparative method as well as the evolutionist model of cultural development, permits us to grasp human diversity in its respective geographical, cultural, and ethnic singularity. Rather, the genre forms the object of an eminently critical examination, which refers not only to different literary forms, but also to the concepts of knowledge on which these are based. Thus the author—in explicitly confronting the writing practices of contemporary representatives of colonial literature such as the publicist, writer and colonial official Paul Bonnetain and the journalist and author Jean Ajalbert—⁴⁶ subjects these forms of travel literature to a methodical "purification procedure" or "exorcism,"⁴⁷ which, from a xenophilic perspective, targets the falsification of the traveler's claim to truth, referring primarily to the

44 On the importance of world travels and scientific travel reports with regard to the production of a comprehensive knowledge of the world, cf. Walter Erhart's contribution in the present volume.

45 Cf. Kirsten Kramer, *Between Nature and Culture. Comparing, Natural History, and Anthropology in Modern French Travel Narratives Around 1800* (François-René de Chateaubriand), in: Eleonora Rohland et al. (eds.), *Contact, Conquest, and Colonization: How Practices of Comparing Shaped Empires and Colonialism around the World*, London/New York 2021, 199–224.

46 Cf. Segalen, *Essai sur l'exotisme*, 713 n. 26; on Segalen's critical discussion of colonial literature, cf. Forsdick, *Defining the Exotic*.

47 In a similar vein, Forsdick describes Segalen's method as a "reiterated act of negation and expiation, as if the only viable approach to exoticism is through cultural and semantic exorcism" (*Defining the Exotic*, 27).—"Exorcistic" purification procedures that bear xenophobic or xenophilic traits are part of the fixed repertoire of forms of reception of travelogues, which are also themselves part of the purification procedure; cf. Schüttpelz, *Die Moderne im Spiegel des Primitiven*, 332–334; with reference to Michael Harbsmeier, *Spontaneous Ethnographies. Towards a Social History of Travellers' Tales*, in: *MESS (Mediterranean Ethnological Summer School 1994/95)*, Ljubljana 1995, S. 23–39; as well as to Bruno Latour's use of the term "purification" in the context of the definition of modernity, cf. Bruno Latour, *Wir sind nie modern gewesen. Versuch einer symmetrischen Anthropologie*, Frankfurt am Main 2008; Segalen's case represents the "xenophilic" variant of exorcism, which is directed against the existence of the traveler's prejudices and the potential suppression of foreign claims to truth.

selection of *comparata* in the areas of flora and fauna and the physiognomy of the peoples observed. These *comparata* are not products of an empirical observation of singular phenomena, but represent recurring descriptive patterns that have detached themselves from the traveler's sense-based experience:

Avant tout, déblayer le terrain. Jeter par-dessus bord tout ce que contient de mésusé et de rance ce mot d'exotisme. Le dépouiller de tous ses oripeaux : le palmier et le chameau ; casque de colonial, peaux noires et soleil jaune ; et du même coup se débarrasser de tous ceux qui les employèrent avec une faconde niaise. Il ne s'agira donc ni des Bonnetain, ni des Ajalbert [...].⁴⁸

Clear the field first of all. Throw overboard everything misused or rancid contained in the word exoticism. Strip it of all its cheap finery: palm tree and camel; tropical helmet; black skins and yellow sun; and, at the same time, get rid of all those who used it with an inane loquaciousness. My study will not be about the Bonnetains or Ajalberts of this world [...].⁴⁹

Consequently, in Segalen's view, the comparative descriptions of landscapes and human groups in colonial travel literature⁵⁰ are characterized by the stereotypical repetition of recurring *comparata*; they are based on a routinization of comparative operations that leads to the mere return of the same and thus does not unfold the productive epistemological potential inherent in the comparative practices underlying the scientific travel reports of the 18th and 19th centuries. Instead, much like the generalizing comparisons of evolutionist anthropology, it merely provides confirmation of what is already known on the basis of prior assumptions and readings.

The specific historical context in which this critique is located is even more evident in the polemical rejection of "tropical exoticism" and the trope of "torrid skies."⁵¹ These terms refer to descriptions of geographical heat distribution known since antiquity, which divide the Earth into different meteorological zones and, from the 18th and 19th centuries onwards, are closely associated with scientific approaches to climate theory, which in turn are often related to deterministic environmentalist

48 Segalen, *Essai sur l'exotisme*, 713.

49 Segalen, *Essay on Exoticism*, 18.

50 The term "littérature coloniale" in Segalen refers to the literature written by members belonging to the social groups inhabiting the colonies, cf. Segalen, *Essai sur l'exotisme*, 728 [*Essay on Exoticism*, 35]; on this sociological understanding of the term, which is still common in recent literary studies and differs from the approach to the "exotic" variant based on the representation of the foreign, cf. Jean-Marc Moura, *La littérature coloniale: une théorie ambiguë et contradictoire*, in: Jean-Marc Moura (ed.), *L'Europe littéraire et l'ailleurs*, Paris 1989, 107–124.

51 Cf. Segalen, *Essai sur l'exotisme*, 747 [*Essay on Exoticism*, 13].

assumptions.⁵² Since the end of the 18th century, such climate-theoretical considerations, prominently represented by the Baron de Montesquieu and Espiard de la Borde, have shaped in particular physical anthropology and the creation of a “doctrine of race” associated with it, which combines with the division of humanity into a “natural” hierarchy of distinct and stable “races,” the formation of which is not solely attributed to hereditary characteristics, but in many cases also to divergent environmental influences.⁵³ The essay thus locates colonial literature in the broader context of 19th-century “racial science,” which is repeatedly invoked in the text in explicit references to Arthur de Gobineau’s *Essai sur l’inegalité des races humaines* (1853–55),⁵⁴ and whose comparisons of human groups, especially within physical anthropology, are closely linked to the stadial theory of evolutionism. For Segalen, the genre of colonial literature thus does not represent a counter-model to the normative anthropological comparativism of the 19th century. On the contrary, it proves to be a subtle continuation of the theoretical premises on which this is based.

A similar polemic against the traditional paradigm of 19th-century travel literature is directed in Segalen’s text against the Romantic authors Francois-René de Chateaubriand and Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, as well as against contemporary writers such as Pierre Loti.⁵⁵ However, it is now no longer primarily concerned with the selection of the objects of comparison, but rather refers to their classification on the basis of the *tertia* chosen in each case, as the author points out with reference to the writer Maurice de Guérin, who also belongs to the Romantic era:

Ainsi, Maurice de G[uérin] s’est d’abord pénétré de la Nature, puis il s’en est totalement retiré. Cependant que ses contemporains, Romantiques, “n’ont fait de la nature que le corollaire de leur moi, et n’en ont rendu que des aspects particuliers”. Tels Loti et tous les (“touristes impressionnistes”).⁵⁶

Similarly, Maurice de Guérin first gained a complete understanding of Nature, then completely retreated from it. His Romantic contemporaries, meanwhile,

52 On zonal theories of heat distribution on Earth and on the historical development of climate theory, cf. Franz Mauelshagen, *Climate as a Scientific Paradigm: Early History of Climatology to 1800*, in: Sam White/Christian Pfister/Franz Mauelshagen (eds.), *The Palgrave Handbook of Climate History*. Basingstoke 2018, [https://dx.doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-43020-5_36].

53 On the situation in the early 19th century, cf. Conklin, *In the Museum of Man*, 22–23; cf. also George W. Stocking, *French Anthropology in 1800*, in: George W. Stocking (ed.), *Race, Culture, and Evolution. Essays in the History of Anthropology*, Chicago, 1982, 13–41; on later environmentalist approaches in the context of physical anthropology, cf. also Conklin, *In the Museum of Man*, 30–31.

54 Cf. Segalen, *Essai sur l’exotisme*, 767, 773 [Essay sur exoticism, 69].

55 Cf. Segalen, *Essai sur l’exotisme*, 726 [Essay on Exoticism, 33].

56 Segalen, *Essai sur l’exotisme*, 725.

“only understood nature as the corollary to their own selves, and described only some of its particular features.” So it is with the Lotis and all “impressionistic tourists.”⁵⁷

The first allusion here is to the type of description of landscapes, peoples and cultures in America, the Orient, or on islands of the Indian Ocean characteristic of Chateaubriand and Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, in which Europe functions both as an implicit object of comparison (*comparatum*) and as a central standard of comparison (*tertium*), against which the evaluation of non-European nature is measured,⁵⁸ regardless of whether it is conceived as an extra-societal ideal state or as a place of countercultural savagery and barbarism.

Segalen's rejection is thus directed against a practice of comparison that does not focus on the description and literary recording of the ethnographic and geographic diversity found in the observed territories and peoples, but rather measures the foreign and unknown against the standard of the known. Such modes of comparison, in Segalen's view, thus pursue a strategy of appropriation or assimilation that, ultimately, causes the singularity and difference of non-European peoples, languages, and cultures to disappear.

It is no coincidence that this polemic anticipates the main features of the post-colonial critique of comparison that emerged toward the end of the 20th century and was largely fueled by the asymmetrical power relations that existed between the (Western) agents of comparison and the (non-Western) objects of comparison.⁵⁹ As suggested in recent scholarship,⁶⁰ the essay's critique of the literary appropriation or assimilation of the foreign can indeed be linked to “colonial exoticism” as advocated, for instance, by the authors Marius and Ary Leblond, explicitly mentioned in the text,⁶¹ as well as to the related discussion of French colonialism in New Imperialism. Since the beginning of the 19th century, French colonial policy has pursued the “doctrine of assimilation,” which, based on the principle of the “equality” of all

57 Segalen, *Essay on exoticism*, 32.

58 In this, Romantic travel literature follows the earlier European world travel literature of François Lafitau, Georg Forster, or Louis-Antoine de Bougainville, in which the newly discovered foreign worlds were also described and compared in terms of European norms and cultural standards; see Walter Erhart's contribution in the present volume.

59 On the postcolonial critique of comparison, see Rajagopalan Radhakrishnan, *Why Compare?*, in: *New Literary History* 40 (3/2009), 453–471; Pheng Chea, *Grounds of Comparison*, in: *diacritics* 29 (4/1999), 3–18.

60 Cf. Forsdick, *Defining the Exotic*, 41–42.

61 Cf. Segalen, *Essay sur l'exotisme*, 728; the cousins were contemporary French writers who drew on colonial themes and “racial issues” in their novels and were in direct exchange with Segalen (cf. *Essai sur l'exotisme*, 727 n. 43).

people promoted ever since the French Revolution, propagates the affiliation of the colonies as an integral, if noncontiguous, part of the mother country.⁶² In the course of the 19th century, this colonial policy was increasingly criticized by representatives of scientific evolutionism and “racial theorists,” with reference to the different developmental rates between peoples or nations, and led, in 1900, to the “policy of association” explicitly mentioned by Segalen.⁶³ It was, however, based on a universalistic thinking, which also presumed the superiority and exemplarity of French culture, and in this respect significantly shared the basic assumptions of contemporary evolutionist and “racial theories.” The essay, consequently, engages in an eminently critical examination of universalizing and normative comparative practices, revealing that neither the colonial nor the romantic variants of travel literature can serve as a viable realization of an aesthetic that aims to represent the irreducible cultural and ethnic “diversity” and difference of non-European peoples and cultures. Both variants of travel writing are unable to provide ethnographic counter-models to the normative and generalizing anthropological comparisons inherent in the comparative method and the evolutionist models associated with it, but, on the contrary, appear to insistently affirm the simplifications, hierarchizations, and standardizations that underlie them.

Segalen, in turn, counters the literary practices of ethnographic comparison outlined above, which negate the cultural difference and uniqueness of the foreign cultures and peoples observed, by offering his own exoticist model of knowledge and comparison, which is of central importance with regard to scientific model-building in the field of ethnographic-ethnological knowledge production in modernity. This model is not only based on the selection of empirical objects (*comparata*) and their allocation through specific comparative grounds (*tertia*), but also includes the actors of ethnographic comparison and the particular relationship they bear to the milieu they observe. The implications of the model are tangible in the gesture of a renewed critical discussion of the travel writer Pierre Loti and other contemporary “exoticist” authors:

[...] pourquoi *tout simplement*, en vérité, ne pas prendre le contre-pied de ceux-là dont je me défends? Pourquoi ne pas tenter la *contre-épreuve*? Ils ont dit ce qu'ils ont vu, ce qu'ils ont senti en présence des *choses* et des gens inattendus dont ils allaient chercher le choc. Ont-ils révélé ce que ces choses et ces gens pensaient en eux-mêmes et d'eux ? Car il y a peut-être, du voyageur au spectacle, un autre choc en retour dont vibre ce qu'il voit. Par son intervention, parfois si malencontreuse, si aventurière, [...] est-ce qu'il ne vas pas perturber le champ d'équilibre établi depuis des siècles? Est-

62 Cf. Raymond F. Betts, *Assimilation and Association in French Colonial Policy 1890–1914*, New York 1961.

63 Cf. Segalen, *Essai sur l'exotisme*, 728 [Essay on Exoticism, 35].

ce qu'il ne se manifestera pas autour de lui, en raison de son attitude, soit hostile, soit recueillie, des défiances ou des attirances?...Tout cela, réaction non plus du milieu sur le Voyageur, mais du Voyageur sur le milieu vivant [...].⁶⁴

Why actually should I not simply take the opposing view from those views I am defending myself against? Why not strive to counter-prove their findings? They expressed what they saw, what they felt in the presence of unexpected things and people from which and from whom they sought to experience a shock. Did they reveal what those things and those people themselves thought and what they thought of them? For there is perhaps another shock, from the traveler to the object of his gaze, which rebounds and makes what he sees vibrate. Will not his very intervention—at times so inopportune and venturesome [...]—disturb the equilibrium established centuries ago? Will he not, by reason of his attitude—whether hostile or meditative—arouse mistrust or attraction?... I attempted to express all that, the effect that the traveler has on the living milieu rather than the milieu's effect on the traveler [...].⁶⁵

Segalen identifies the ethnographer's gaze on the foreign environment to be an indirect intervention or influence on the observed milieu, which causes a change in the object of investigation. This change takes the form of a "shock from the traveler to the object of his gaze," a "choc de retour," which also has an impact on the traveler's own experience and perception of the observed persons and environments. The author formulates here fundamental reflections on the dynamic exchange between the subject and the object of ethnographic observation that initiate a new thinking of exoticism. Just like the previously quoted rejection of stereotyped objects of comparison, which take on a life of their own as opposed to sensory perception, Segalen's critical interventions clearly relate to the contemporary distinction between "arm-chair anthropology" and empirical field practice, which was the subject of numerous scholarly debates in France as early as 1910. The key protagonists in these debates were Mauss and Durkheim's students on the one hand, and ethnographers such as Arnold van Gennep or Marcel Delafosse, and later André Métraux, on the other.⁶⁶ In a systematic form these debates are also taken up by Bronislaw Malinowski in the introduction to his seminal study *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922), where they culminate in methodological considerations on the importance of "participant observation," which identifies the observer as part of the everyday life of the observed

64 Segalen, *Essai sur l'exotisme*, 709–710.

65 Segalen, *Essay on Exoticism*, 14.

66 On these debates, cf. in detail Conklin, *In the Museum of Man*, 76–85.

peoples and their environment and is seen as indispensable for the adequate ethnographic recording of the “native’s point of view.”⁶⁷

The quoted passage from the *Essai sur l'exotisme* not only anticipates these methodological reflections but also outlines the complex constellation of ethnographic comparison that, from the beginning of the 20th century, was based primarily on a comparison of one’s own perception of the foreign (the comparison of Europe with foreign cultures and peoples done from the European perspective) with forms of a foreign perception of the foreign (the comparison of “primitive” cultures with Europe done from the non-European perspective). It is this constellation that gives rise to the model of “inverse” or “reversible” ethnography,⁶⁸ which fundamentally shapes the ethnological-ethnographic formation of knowledge and practice in modernity and produces multiple “symmetrizing” practices of comparison and translation. These practices lead Mauss, Lévi Strauss and other French ethnologists to adopt local indigenous forms of thought and integrate them into their own categorization systems, thereby revealing that the European *comparatum* can no longer claim the status of an implicit but overarching standard of comparison (*tertium*). These thinkers are led to take their starting points from ethnographic observations established within the framework of fieldwork and the mutual exchange between the observed object and the observing subject implied in the field situation.⁶⁹

It is interesting to observe that in Segalen’s work this comparative constellation is situated in a different historical context: it appears to be founded in a theoretical approach which, in the *Essai sur l'exotisme*, replaces the explanatory models of 19th-century folk psychology with a theoretical concept that is taken from individual psychology. This approach is provided by Jules Gaultier’s study *Le Bovarysme. La psychologie dans l'oeuvre de Flaubert* (1892), which describes “bovarysme” as “la faculté départie à l’homme de se concevoir autrement qu’il n’est”⁷⁰ and, in referring to ideas derived from the evolutionary theory of natural selection, explicitly identifies it as the mark of an advanced stage of human development.⁷¹ In the *Essai sur l'exotisme*, it is the subject’s stepping out of his own self, as described by Gaultier, the ability to adopt a point of view of observation external to himself, which enables him to perceive himself as

67 Cf. Bronislaw Malinowski, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific. An Account of Native Enterprise and Adventure in the Archipelagoes of Melanesian New Guinea*, London 2002 [1922], 19.

68 Cf. on the definition of the approach of “inverse” or “reversible” ethnography: Schüttpeitz, *Die Moderne im Spiegel des Primitiven*; cf. also Fritz Kramer, *Der rote Fes. Über Besessenheit und Kunst in Afrika*, Frankfurt am Main 1987.

69 Cf. Descola, *Anthropological Comparatims*, 407–408.

70 Cf. Jules de Gaultier, *Le Bovarysme. La psychologie dans l'oeuvre de Flaubert*, Paris 1902, 39; cf. also Segalen, *Essai sur l'exotisme*, 714–715 [Essay on Exoticism, 19].

71 Cf. J. Haas, Gaultier, Jules de. *Le Bovarysme*, in: *Zeitschrift für französische Sprache und Literatur* 26 (1904), 238–244.

different from what he is, and thus to make that approximation of his own and the others' perception of the foreign, which provides the model for the significant "inversion" of perspectives that is constitutive for modern ethnology. In contrast to the previously mentioned ethnologists, in Segalen's case, consequently, it is not empirical ethnography that performs the historical replacement of the asymmetrical comparisons and hierarchizations inherent in evolutionist anthropology and the comparative method; rather, the overcoming of the ethnological model of evolutionism presupposes a theoretical concept that, paradoxically, is itself based on fundamental evolutionist assumptions, which are developed within the framework of a theory grounded in individual psychology, but also come to be applied to the analysis of the progress of humanity as a whole. It is, therefore, no surprise that in the further scientific and philosophical definition of exoticism as a comparative knowledge model in its own right, Segalen does not only draw on a whole series of abstract theoretical models—such as Kant's transcendental schematism or Schopenhauer's "law of representation"—⁷² which are characterized by rigorous methodological generalizations, as they also underlie the comparative method. At the same time, he also himself has recourse to the organic model of development inherent in evolutionist stadial theory, which is now no longer related to the historical change of peoples and cultures, but—in a characteristic metaphorical turn—is applied to the methodical foundation of the concept of exoticism itself, which in the future will develop like a biological seed ("develop freely [...] like a purified seed") and thus paradoxically locates itself in an imaginary, organologically based evolutionary line of progress.⁷³

The definition of exoticism thus reveals a complex foundation characterized by the significant co-presence of competing literary, scientific, and philosophical models of knowledge in the description of human diversity. While the discussion of the literary models of travel literature is marked by the author's decisive opposition to routinized ethnographic comparative practices, behind which still appear the normative and universalistic assumptions inherent in the comparative method and the evolutionist models associated with it, the foundation of the methodological approach to exoticism makes it clear that the same universalist deep structures and law-like patterns also underlie the author's own conception of science and knowledge production. In the *Essai sur l'exotisme*, particularizing and generalizing categorizations of cultural phenomena thus do not constitute a contradiction, but on the contrary are marked by complex interferences, syntheses, and convergences, which are constitutive for the beginnings of the modern knowledge formation.

72 Segalen, *Essai sur l'exotisme*, 714 [Essay on Exoticism, 19].

73 Segalen, *Essai sur l'exotisme*, 714 [Essay on Exoticism, 19].

Conclusion: Comparison and Change

Segalen's programmatic definition of exoticism thus paradigmatically points to a threshold situation in the history of knowledge: on the one hand, it provides a complex comparative model of knowledge that is characterized by the replacement of temporalizing comparisons by predominantly spatial comparisons and thus reveals a transformation of comparative practices that clearly indicates the gradual failure of stadial evolutionism. The systematic description of exoticism thus illustrates that, in the French discourses from 1900 onwards, ethnographic, and ethnological descriptions of foreign cultures or human groups are increasingly disconnected from those concepts of civilizational change that, in the 19th century, served as the basis and guarantor of the comparative method and normative descriptions of human diversity and variability. On the other hand, the definition of exoticism documents that it is precisely the crisis of the comparative method and the gradual dismissal of the evolutionist model of historical change that in turn brings about a significant change which affects the modern knowledge formation of the 20th century as a whole. The programmatic essay documents the emergence of various models and practices of modeling that, around 1900, are situated in the interplay of competing and often contradictory heuristic combinatorics or "cohabitations" of approaches, equally involving scientific, philosophical, and psychological as well as literary practices of knowledge and comparison. At the same time, exoticism provides the setting for a new kind of modeling of ethnographic-ethnological knowledge that no longer emphasizes similarities and differences between European and non-European cultures, peoples, languages, or environments, but focuses above all on the different forms and types of categorizing and classifying these. It appears to be less concerned with comparing peoples and cultures than with the comparison of different scientific and literary models of comparing, in which the historical and epistemological conditions of comparison themselves move to the center of ethnographic and ethnological descriptions. Consequently, it is the extensive exploring of the "comparability" of the compared cultures and the reflection on competing models of knowledge that increasingly form the focus of these descriptions. Precisely in overcoming the evolutionist model of cultural change, French ethnography thus marks the beginning of a new, reflexive type of modeling practice that both indicates and operates the significant historical change in the modern formation of knowledge itself.

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