SIMILARITY

A PARADIGM FOR CULTURE THEORY

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Edited by
ANIL BHATTI and DOROTHEE KIMMICH

with the assistance of SARA BANGERT

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Introduction

Anil Bhatti and Dorothee Kimmich

The idea that the concept of 'similarity' could offer a new, alternative approach to cultural studies arose from preliminary discussions between scholars in India (New Delhi) and Germany (Konstanz, Tübingen).[1] Following these discussions, different conceptions of similarity were considered by scholars from diverse disciplines within the framework of three conferences, supported by the Fritz Thyssen Foundation, the Excellence Cluster 16: 'Cultural Foundations of Integration' at the University of Konstanz, and the Institute of German Studies and the Forum Scientiarum at the University of Tübingen. This volume is a collection of the contributions and papers that emerged from these conferences.

This volume does not seek to present a comprehensive history of similarity or of ideas about similarity. Not only would this require a review of the entirety of philosophical history from Aristotle to Nelson Goodman, it would also demand a survey of many other academic fields in which related concepts, such as mimicry, mimesis, analogy, assimilation and imitation, play central roles; in other words, it would require an overview of knowledge traditions as diverse as art history and psychology, as well as cognitive science and biology.

Instead, this collection seeks to introduce and to explore important and exemplary interpretations of similarity for cultural studies research. The essays presented here thus stem from the relevant disciplines of literary and cultural studies, but also from philosophy, political science, sociology, ethnology and history. The essays are arranged according to their systematic perspectives: the first part of the book deals with conceptual attempts to establish the relevance of similarity for cultural studies research, while the second part is devoted to testing different models of application.

'Similarity' in the History of Knowledge (Dorothee Kimmich)

Why 'similarity'?

'Similarity' is not a new concept, and is not thought of here as a research paradigm lacking its own history and tradition. Quite the contrary: prominent authors stretching from antiquity to the classical modern period have emphasized the importance of similarity as an epistemological guiding principle – and an orienting practice – in central passages of their works. In the twentieth century, however, 'similarity' as a heuristic concept became the focus of more and more scepticism. While it never became completely obsolete, a useful update of the concept of similarity within the framework of cultural studies debates has yet to emerge.

While the concept of distinction, of 'difference', set significant precedents in twentieth-century theory and flourished in a wide variety of scholarly disciplines, concepts of similarity found few supporters. Not only did structuralist and post-structuralist theorems declare difference (and its specifically deconstructivist counterpart, *différance*) to be the paradigm of knowledge organization, cultural studies also operated with the concepts of 'identity' and 'otherness' – and thus sought to identify cultural differences and arrange them into hierarchical systems.[2] Far removed from such considerations, thinking about difference also became a descriptive and analytical concept, and gained political relevance, especially in the context of *gender studies* and *postcolonial studies*.[3]

Cultural differences were not only marked and criticized as distinguishing hierarchical characteristics, they also experienced an enduring ideologization in certain political and scientific contexts: '[I]n the post-Cold War world, the most important distinctions among peoples are not ideological, political, or economic. They are cultural.'[4] The acceptance and impact of this thesis – expressed as a political battle cry by Samuel P. Huntington in the 1990s – have not been limited to the field of political theory. Indeed, to this day it represents, encourages and promotes highly effective political and social practices of cultural differentiation, othering and even discrimination.

The concepts of identity and otherness are both becoming evermore questionable, not least due to the global political events of the last few decades. Not only have the problems with 'Clash of Civilizations' as an explanatory model and a pattern of action been exposed, but the assumption of distinct cultural identities[5] in the era of postmodern migratory flows seems increasingly inadequate.[6] For these reasons, it is important not only to discuss but also to reflect upon whether a concept of cultural similarity can be developed alongside a concept of cultural difference: a field of 'as-well-as', and thus something like a philosophy of similarities.[7] In

doing so, it is important to consider the requirements that such a concept would have to meet, to avoid becoming arbitrary.

What is 'similarity'?

'We cannot easily imagine a more familiar or fundamental notion than this [the notion of similarity], or a notion more ubiquitous in its applications. . . . And yet, strangely, there is something logically repugnant about it', wrote Willard van Orman Quine in his 'Dewey Lectures', held in 1969 at Columbia University, New York.[8] And Quine was no exception. His unease with the concept of similarity was shared by many other philosophers, as well as by linguists, scholars of visual studies, psychologists, cognition theorists, biologists, ethnologists and literary scholars: 'For we are baffled when we try to relate the general notion of similarity significantly to logical terms. . . . The dubiousness of this notion is itself a remarkable fact. For surely there is nothing more basic to thought and language than our sense of similarity.'[9]

In addition to sharing these concerns, many scholars have agreed with Quine's assessment that the term, the concept and even the experience of 'similarity' are not only familiar to us but are global and fundamental – and yet are unsuitable for scientific use. Thus, we clearly have no problems understanding what similarity is in our everyday lives, or how we identify, evaluate, negotiate and use similarities around us. Despite this, a definition of similarity according to classical criteria such as necessary and sufficient conditions seems to be stubbornly elusive.

Similarity is thus 'clearly' a vague term, to phrase it as a paradox. The judgment of the history of philosophy from Aristotle to Quine finds such vague terms to be philosophically unacceptable. In the case of similarity, Nelson Goodman's criticism has been particularly influential – even outside philosophical circles. He describes 'similarity' as 'slippery', and deems it comparatively worthless for philosophy and science: 'Comparative judgments of similarity often require not merely selection of relevant properties but a weighting of their relative importance, and variation in both relevance and importance can be rapid and enormous.'[10] Goodman concludes that 'circumstances alter similarities'.[11] He claims that such contextual dependence precludes an appropriate and satisfying geometric modelling of similarity.

Over the last few decades, a variety of disciplines have repeatedly sought to follow Goodman's criticism and to model similarity in ways beyond the geometrical approach. All of these new approaches begin by formalizing the contextuality of similarity; as Lieven Decock and Igor Douven stressed in their 2011 essay, for instance, 'the main stumbling

blocks for the old geometrical model . . . were the fact that it is unable to account for asymmetries in people's similarity judgements as well as for the context-sensitivity of such judgements'.[12]

For both philosophical and, increasingly, cognitive scientific and psychological discussions, models and methods that can be traced back to Wittgenstein's reflections on family resemblance are helpful, such as Lotfi Zadeh's so-called *fuzzy logic* or Eleanor Rosch's 'Prototype Theory'. Such approaches do not seek to precisely define the characteristics, borders and capacities of 'similarity'; instead, they seek to understand and describe its vagueness.[13]

In 1990, George Lakoff observed that philosophical research on vagueness was not 'PC' ('politically correct').[14] He was clearly referring to a specific scientific tradition that he saw as underlying philosophy, linguistics and possibly other empirical sciences. And his observations are certainly consistent with the rejection of similarity by many philosophers: the vagueness of similarity is not 'PC'.

At almost the same time, other disciplines joined and advanced the debates surrounding vague concepts and the vagueness of concepts. The cognitive sciences, semiotics, and especially psychology and linguistics, have come to dominate the field. It is little wonder, then, that discussions about similarity have become particularly relevant to reflections on vagueness. Similarity defines a field of knowledge that connects questions from theories of perception, epistemology, media history and cultural anthropology, and manages to span the distance to an anthropologically connoted aesthetics as well. In this sense, one can view the discourse surrounding similarity to be a sort of 'index fossil' that can be traced through modern discursive formations, drawing a profile line through modern considerations of existential vagueness and fundamental diffusivity.[15]

For the time being, we can at least state this: vague concepts are conceptualized as entities with fluid borders and, to some degree, stable centres. Similarity is not only itself such an entity, it is also the structural principle according to which such entities are organized: precisely according to a higher or lower similarity, with the prototype at the centre of the field.[16] Such a conception rehabilitates similarity as a useful philosophical concept, for instance, in the area of philosophy of identity, 'where it is argued that the so-called paradoxes of identity – puzzle cases involving the possibility of change over time and issues of constitution – can be explained in a uniform and elegant manner by construing the identity predicate as it occurs in those paradoxes in terms of similarity'.[17]

Most recently, similarity has become important in the philosophy of science as well: 'A third case in point, this one from the philosophy

of science, is the role attributed to similarity in the so-called semantic conception of theories. . . . The appropriate model–world relation . . . is rather one of similarity in certain respects. . . . Meanwhile, this has become almost common lore among philosophers of science.'[18]

Thus there is now a certain consensus regarding the conceptual description of similarity, if not about a clear definition. Ulrike Hahn, Nick Chater and Lucy B. Richardson memorably expressed a sentiment that most similarity scholars would subscribe to today: '[S]imilarity is determined by the transformation distance between representations: entities which are perceived to be similar have representations which are readily transformed into one another, whereas transforming between dissimilar entities requires many transformations.'[19]

In this definition too, similarity retains an affinity to the spatial modelling of proximity and distance, and a certain connection to a temporal dimension that can be best described as a slower or more rapid, or as a clear or less clear, transformation over time. Today, similarity is no longer considered to be a property of objects, but rather as a more or less subjective, mental, cognitive concept that facilitates, structures and orients our perceptions. For cognitive scientists, questions regarding contextual dependency – the so-called 'perspective' (*Hinsicht*) that judges the relevance of similarity references – remain unanswered.

Furthermore, we can clearly state that until a few decades ago, philosophically analytical scholarly discourse had a tendency to eliminate relationships of similarity from its considerations, primarily for methodological reasons. But this does *not* mean, as many authors themselves would concede, that similarity does not have a meaningful role in many areas of cognition, memory, language and culture. What it does mean, however, is that within a specific and dominant academic context, speaking about similarity causes problems and thus becomes less relevant. For this reason, the discourse around similarity has migrated to other fields.

What is 'similarity' for?

'A philosophy of similarity must lead to an ontology whose fundamental concepts are of the near and the far, of distance and remoteness.'[20] With this statement Robert Spaemann makes it clear that similarity connotes spatial thinking, and thus is in agreement with recent research in cognitive science. An ontology of similarity will have to deal with spatial relationships, and concepts of distance and proximity.

Similarity implies something like qualitative proximity. We might talk about the spatial proximity of objects, the temporal proximity of events, the numerical proximity of quantities, qualitative proximities (such

as in colours), and naturally also the emotional proximity of humans, which we call sympathy and empathy. Relationships of similarity are thus useful to describe conditions that imply both relative proximity and relative distance at the same time, and which represent these respective distances as dynamic, as changeable. This is why similarity always includes a dynamic and temporal but not teleological aspect, in addition to spatial characteristics.

Similarity is a 'figure of the continuous',[21] of the transitory. Although it requires the demarcation of differences, it never constitutes a break or an opposition. The concept of similarity connotes evolution, change and metamorphosis, but concepts such as loss of self, adjustment pressure and assimilation can also be described using models of similarity. As a problematic and problem-generating figure of the continual, similarity disrupts the great heuristic divisions of modernity: nature and culture, people and things, foreign (other) and self. In contrast to a philosophical ontology, cultural studies research on similarity must also pose questions about the 'practical', praxeological aspects of similarity. While philosophical ontology asks the question, 'what is similarity?', the cognitive sciences ask the question, 'what is similarity for?' Cultural studies must also pose questions about the practices of similarity: not just the question of how we can *recognize* similarity, but also those about how – and why – we *do* similar things. Questions regarding practices are connected with previously mentioned concepts such as mimesis, mimicry, assimilation, acculturation and imitation, as well as questions about globalization, internationalization, transculturality, migration, and even literature, art and aesthetics.

Similarity arises, declines, and can be more or less clear, important or obvious, according to different aspects and respects. Similarity can be covered up or made more prominent. Relationships of similarity can mark something spontaneous, involuntary, unconscious, even something unwanted and passive. On the other hand, there are political, social and cultural practices of intentional and wilful 'similarizing', but also many examples of forced and violent assimilation.

Our perception of similarity is intuitive, and its criteria are undefinable or are dependent on context. Practices of similarity, including the desire for imitation and the delight at successful mimesis, are innate abilities, but are without doubt also culturally and environmentally dependent. 'Similarity' seems to be semantically symmetrical, but in certain situations proves to be irreversible and asymmetrical. Similarity is a category of perception, and exhibits an irreducible aspect of cultural and individual experience. Similarity organizes knowledge and memory, yet at the same time misleads us with platitudes and commonplaces of all kinds. It is both

premodern and postmodern. It overextends philosophy and is a challenge for cultural studies.

'Similarity': Preliminary Thoughts about a *Suchbegriff* or Search Term (Anil Bhatti)

Hermeneutic abstinence or: what is 'similarity' good for?

Thinking about similarity opens different possibilities for dealing with the problems of complex societies than do methodologies focused on differences. In India, for example, a strong methodological preference for associating questions of diversity with a specific form of tolerance has developed over time, fed in part by the experiences of anti-colonialism. Within this context, thinking about tolerance is not based on a paradigm of 'understanding'; instead, it requires a concept of social practice that is based on 'accommodation'. This has led to a preference for the maxim that it is more important to get along with one another than to understand one another. In other words, that it is more important to cultivate the art of social behaviour in conditions of diversity first, and only later seek the logic of understanding behind such behaviour. In short, it has led to a strategy of de-dramatization.

India stands in sharp contrast to Germany where we seek to use a hermeneutic of understanding to arrive at tolerance. Instead, India has developed something like a preference for non-hermeneutic methods to discuss tolerance, a result of historical experiences in a complex, multilingual and multi-religious society that is stratified by caste and class, and that has always contained a latent potential for violence. Such methods do not focus primarily on dichotomies or the drawing of boundaries, but on attempts to find overlapping fields of similarity. In cultural practice this means that the principle of 'this . . . as well as that' is emphasized, as opposed to the principle of 'either–or'. This allows syncretic possibilities to emerge in a society otherwise threatened by fundamentalism.

In such contexts, thinking about similarity should not be (mis) understood as a false form of harmonization or the levelling of differences. Rather, considerations of similarity contain a subversive potential to expose the claimed antagonisms and radical incompatibilities of opposition, differences and so-called 'clashes' as nothing more than ideology. In India, the emphasis on similarity thus represents an important pillar for all secular movements and beliefs. Conversely, a disregard for considerations of similarity foments fanaticism, which often leads to violent riots. Why, for instance, should Hindus and Muslims – who otherwise live and cooperate well together in everyday social practice – suddenly become enemies simply because religious fanatics want to demonstrate the irreconcilable

differences between their respective interpretations of Hinduism and Islam?

The destructive potential for violence in fundamentalist movements in both India and Europe, and the necessity of finding new ways of discussing tolerance and integration policies in a world of migration, form the background for the timeliness of 'similarity'. The current relevance of 'similarity' for cultural studies is related to the problems of complex, pluricultural societies that are increasingly characterized by a high level of linguistic, religious and cultural diversity. Often these are migratory societies, such as in Europe today, or they are states whose diversity has grown over the course of history, such as in India. All such societies must deal with processes of transformation that have led to further increases in social diversity. *Pluri*cultural conditions (not *multi*cultural, parallel societies), multilingualism and syncretism mark the tension between the heterogeneity that characterizes large state units (such as in India, and many countries in Africa, Latin America and Asia) and the homogeneity that is often expected of mostly smaller nation-states (such as in Europe). Heterogeneous states have increasingly come under pressure from different forms of fundamentalism to homogenize. Conversely, traditional nation-states are confronted by new challenges that are characterized by processes of heterogenization.

In this often conflict-filled process, largely monolingual and more or less monocultural living environments are becoming pluralized; the emergence of Europe from a range of different nation-states is one example. Recourse to historical experience plays an important role in such processes. In Europe, such experiences include the Habsburg monarchy and Central Europe as a region of great linguistic, confessional and cultural diversity. In India, they refer back to the tradition of syncretism in order to emphasize commonalities in religious and social practice(s). Other previously colonialized regions around the world, such as Africa, offer further points of reference.

In open *pluri*cultural worlds, we increasingly see something like a habitus of indifference towards the supposed relevance of visual differences: an 'indifference towards difference'.[22] The reason for this is that, to a certain extent, people are accustomed to difference in pluricultural situations, and there is no need for difference to be further emphasized or even theoretically safeguarded – even within the context of post-colonialism. By contrast, social practices make us aware of and underline similarities. Such considerations of similarity emphasize relations and networks between people/segments of society; they focus on the overall fabric of society.

Thinking about 'similarity' throws a critical light on theoretical and political preferences for the polarity between identity and difference,

and questions concepts such as 'authenticity' and cultural purism. Instead, considerations of similarity place more emphasis on the tentative, the transitory, the unclear – on fluid borders, nuances, minimal deviations, *fuzziness* and vagueness – and define such terms using flexible and polyvalent language.

In the broadest sense, considerations of similarity thus declare scepticism towards the dichotomy between 'self' and 'other'. This dichotomy, hermeneutically favoured in Europe (and especially in Germany), focuses on generating dialogue between multiple, clearly separate entities or positions, in order to achieve something like 'higher' values, such as tolerance of the foreign. These separate entities are usually called 'cultures'. But the dialogue between 'self' and 'foreign' is a binary model that inappropriately simplifies the complexity of the real world – even if it is expanded with the idea of the polylogue to describe polycentric situations. The need for dialogue that such a model necessarily entails requires representatives who can speak on behalf of their respective constituencies. But when it comes to inter-cultural dialogue, representing an entire 'culture' (and speaking on its behalf) is highly problematic.

Considerations of similarity arise out of scepticism towards these dialogic models, which are based on the desire to understand the other: after all, the history of colonialism provides us with many examples of the devastating connection between understanding and oppression.[23] Similarity is thus not a concept of harmonization, but rather a moment of destabilization for supposedly stable, 'natural' dichotomous regimes.

'Pänidentität' or: what is 'similarity'?

The field of translation plays an important role in considerations of similarity, because the concept of partial correspondence and partial variation is well known in both the theory and practice of translation.[24] We know that there are no exact equivalents for many words in different languages. In a passage from his *Parerga and Paralipomena* that remains relevant today, Arthur Schopenhauer wrote: 'and so not all the concepts described by the words of one language are exactly the same as those expressed by the words of another; . . . but they are often concepts that are merely similar and cognate, yet different through some modification'.[25]

The editor of Schopenhauer's work explains that this '*Pänidentität*,' as Schopenhauer expressed it, means 'almost the same' ('*Fastgleichheit*') – which encompasses exactly what we are looking for with considerations of similarity.[26] The overlaps between fixed entities become more flexible and a certain porousness emerges on the boundaries between them; previously discrete domains become permeable. If we call these categories 'circles of

similarity' (following Rudolf Carnap[27]) and consider them to be 'cultures' (in a colloquial sense), then we can state that these cultures are no longer 'monads' due to the many overlaps between them.

If one wishes to maintain the coherence and exclusivity of separate cultures, then one must prevent such overlaps. The *cantonments* in colonial India, the *homelands* of apartheid, the prohibitions against fraternization and the fear-laden denial of similarity in racism are examples of such attempts. As Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar criticized as early as 1936, the brutal form of systematic exclusion of the dalits (the so-called 'untouchables') in the Hindu caste system is also based on a fundamental denial of the possibility of 'fluidity and equity' in social conditions and in social practice.[28]

The idea of similarity and a focus on overlaps can be applied to dissolve rigid dichotomies and cultural hierarchization. In doing so, however, it is not as much about considerations of the *in-between*, the *third space* or hybridity. These are concepts of conditions. Understood as cultural practice, the importance of similarity is that it marks social processes; it is a concept of movement that is conceived as a counter-movement to the dominant hermeneutic of the self and the other.

In addition to approaches from translation studies, the methodological perspective of a 'shared history', introduced to historical scholarship by Sanjay Subrahmanyam, is also important for work on 'similarity'. This perspective deals with concepts such as 'shared', 'connected', 'entangled history' and '*histoire croisée*'; with shared and common history (histories), and their entanglement with one another.[29]

The concept of similarity incorporates many ideas from this line of historical research, particularly its view of cross-border historical interconnections and overlaps. The perspective of a 'shared history' is, for instance, helpful in challenging certain essentializing lines of argumentation within discussions of colonialism. This game of essentializing thought tends to conceive of colonialism as a deformation, as a disruption of a so-called 'inherent' and 'authentic' historical path. Decolonialization, then, is understood as a 'liberation' from external, foreign forces. According to this reading, 'decolonization' thus involves reclamation of the 'pure', 'authentic', 'original roots' of one's 'own' tradition. Behind this view lies an understanding of language, nationality and state as separate, closed units that in many ways can be traced back to Johann Gottfried von Herder.[30]

If we instead deviate from this still dominant view and turn to considerations of historical interconnections, we can evaluate colonialization differently, and understand it as but one part in the contradictory overall development of global interconnections and entanglements. Complex

cultural formations such as Europe or India emerge from processes of increasing interconnectedness that arise from this overall development. From this perspective, the economic, political and cultural reordering of the colonial and post-colonial era is seen as a process that leads to a universalist configuration of solidarity and empathy. It is no longer about the reclamation of authenticity. Rabindranath Tagore recognized such trends in India shortly after the First World War, and sought to combine India's liberation from ('external') colonial rule with an 'internal' liberation from the oppression of the caste system.[31] Anti-colonialism, anti-nationalism, cosmopolitanism, and the combination of national and universal history would be part of this double liberation, and it would be a 'project of universalism'.

Jürgen Osterhammel's works are a good example of such a position, which he compares with Christopher Alan Bayly's 2004 study on *The Birth of the Modern World*:

> Both books forgo a regional breakdown into nations, civilizations, or continents. Both regard colonialism and imperialism as a dimension so important that instead of dealing with it in a separate chapter, they keep it in view throughout. Both assume that there is no sharp distinction between what Bayly, in the subtitle of his book, calls 'global connections' and 'global comparisons'; these can and must be combined with each other, and not all comparisons need the protective backup of strict historical methodology. Controlled play with associations and analogies sometimes, though by no means always, yields more than comparisons overloaded with pedantry can do.[32]

The contradiction between concepts of similarity and models of difference made a decisive impact on the ideology of British colonialism. This ideology developed under the constant tension between the recognition of similarities and the assertion of difference. For colonialist ideology, religion and caste became the central categories of difference, which in India led to far-reaching policies of religious homogenization in the form of closed 'religious communities'.[33] Additionally, a politics of *separate electorates* was established, with representatives of each electorate acting as speakers and negotiation partners between religious communities and with the British colonial power. The result was a disastrous division of society between a majority (Hindus) and a minority (Muslims).

This division disrupted many lines of connection in social practice that had softened religious boundaries. For the anti-colonial movement, the essentialization of religious identity in the form of closed *communities* was a major cause of tensions between Hindus and Muslims. For this

reason, many efforts to generate social peace within Indian politics have been based on concepts of similarities between these groups, and imply a refusal to accept clear, closed and, moreover, assigned identities.[34]

An instructive older document from the anti-colonial movement – one that remains sadly relevant today – emphasizes the element of proximity in religiously diverse societies that are slowly growing together.[35] The report of the Kanpur Riots Enquiry Committee was written following exceptionally bloody clashes between Hindus and Muslims in the industrial city of Kanpur in 1931 (sixteen years before India gained independence in 1947). The idealistic passion found in the report gives us an impression of the intensity with which the anti-colonial movement sought to generate a unity of action between Muslims and Hindus to counteract the colonial politics of '*divide et impera*'. The idea of a cultural amalgamation of Hindus and Muslims was clearly idealistic, but it was also legitimate for the committee to point out that Muslims and Hindus shared many areas of life within India.[36]

This desire to emphasize the common unifying elements in the practices of India's major religions is illustrated by something that Rabindranath Tagore wrote in his journal in 1932, while travelling through Persia and Iraq:

> All over Asia the cry has arisen that sectarian religion cannot be allowed to wreck the natural basis of community life, bringing dissensions where a common economic, social and historical background should preserve an inevitable continuity of cooperation. When during a farewell feast given to an Englishman of high official position in the Government of Palestine he said, 'Palestine is a Mohammedan country, and its government should therefore, be in the hands of the Mohammedans, on condition that the Jewish and Christian minorities are represented in it' – then Mufti-Haji-el-Husaini of Jerusalem answered, 'For us it is an exclusively Arab, not a Mohammedan question. During your sojourn in this country you have doubtless observed that here there are no distinctions between Mohammedan and Christian Arabs. We regard the Christians not as a minority, but as Arabs.'[37]

Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, one of the most important representatives of the anti-colonial movement, emphasized the significance of commonality and a shared heritage in his address to the Indian National Congress in 1940:

> If Hinduism has been the religion of the people here for several thousands of years, Islam also has been their religion for a thousand years.

> Just as a Hindu can say with pride that he is an Indian and follows Hinduism, so also we can say with equal pride that we are Indians and follow Islam. I shall enlarge this orbit still further. The Indian Christian is equally entitled to say with pride that he is an Indian and is following a religion of India, namely Christianity.
>
> Eleven hundred years of common history have enriched India with our common achievement. Our languages, our poetry, our literature, our culture, our art, our dress . . .[38]

Fundamentalism in India adopted the need for classification and segregation from colonialism; this is equally true for both *Hindutva* and various strains of Islamic fundamentalism. The philosopher Alam Khundmiri highlighted this problem for Muslims after India's independence particularly forcefully: 'Muslims are not one homogeneous cultural group in the entire country, if culture is not confused with religion. There are still strong grounds to believe that India comprises different cultural groups, the bases of which are not merely religion.'[39]

Criticism of Eurocentrism or: why 'similarity'?

Looking at similarities not only gives us a new perspective on the colonial history and structurally associated fundamentalism in a country like India, it also makes it possible to formulate a criticism of Eurocentrism and exceptionalism. As Samir Amin has pointed out, the biases of both Christians and Muslims during the crusades were neither Eurocentric nor Islamocentric, because neither religion had enough power to enforce its vision on a global scale.[40] Eurocentrism is a historical position that is closely associated with the development of capitalism, the expansion of colonial rule, and the evolution of a specific colonialist ideology centred on the uniqueness of Europe or the west.

Referencing his novel, *The Enchantress of Florence* (2008), Salman Rushdie once said in an interview:

> [T]here are ideas which grew up in the West, and in a slightly different form they grew up as well in the East; the idea of freedom, of open discourses, of tolerance, of sexual freedom even to the level of hedonism. . . . So to say that we must now consider them to be culturally specific . . . is a denial of human nature.[41]

Such perspectives are becoming ever more common in scholarly research. Where earlier researchers would draw borders, they now find parallels, see similarities and describe networks of relationships. A new style of argumentation has emerged.

In *The Theft of History*, anthropologist Jack Goody noted that the development of 'Bronze Age civilizations in Asia and Europe ran along roughly parallel lines. How then did many European writers assume quite a different development in the two continents from "Antiquity" onwards, leading eventually to the western "invention" of "capitalism"?'[42] He emphasized that it would be a mistake

> to look at the situation solely in terms of some relatively limited differences in the modes of production when there are so many similarities not only in the economy but in the modes of communication and in the modes of destruction including, eventually, the use of gunpowder. All these similarities, including ones in family structure and culture more generally, were set aside in favour of the 'oriental' hypothesis which stresses the different historical trajectories of east and west.[43]

Goody used similar arguments regarding the Renaissance: 'It is the Renaissance that lies at the centre of my concerns, and here I want to confine my attention to similar activities outside Europe, their comparative neglect and what that implies for European historiography.'[44] He was concerned with the global plurality of '*renaissances*', and wrote that '[f]rom a sociological standpoint renaissances were multiple and not confined to "capitalism" nor to the west. Europe was not alone, nor was it a cultural island.'[45]

If we consistently proceed comparatively and develop a global perspective, we arrive at an approach that calls into question the intellectual seizure of historical events. In addition to the Renaissance, this also applies to the Enlightenment. In one study, historian Sebastian Conrad criticized the position that follows from theories of diffusion – namely, that the Enlightenment was a European invention which was then disseminated to the rest of the world: 'Scholars are now challenging the Eurocentric account of the "birth of the modern world".'[46]

Europeans were not alone in contouring the Enlightenment; international authors from across the globe made contributions. 'Rather than a process of diffusion, the longer history of Enlightenment was the result of its constant reinvention' in different places around the world.[47] Needless to say, this criticism does not apply solely to Eurocentrism, but rather to any form of cultural seizure. Indocentric claims to exclusivity can also be rebutted by comparative studies so that universalistic moments emerge. The interest in parallels, analogies and similarities between philosophies in India and Europe means that 'these cease to be "oriental" or "western" thought and instead become "universal" thought'.[48]

India is no more an island than Europe is. In this respect, compara-

tive research that points to the significant connections between Indian and Greek epics (for instance) is particularly relevant in an era when fundamentalist thought is based on the uniqueness of cultural products. Fernando Wulf Alonso, who wrote just such a large-scale comparative study about the epic in India and Greece, came to the following conclusion:

> Once again, it has been noted that in the past, as in the present, cultural and religious pluralism, from within and without, coupled with every imaginable type of cultural interactions, learning, and creations and reworking has prevailed in the Subcontinent, which, in turn, denotes the impossibility of defending exclusivist and unidirectional models or monotonic identities, either for understanding the moment in history or for proposing that falsification of reality as a model for the present. And it has been corroborated time and again how historical reality proves to be infinitely distant from attempts to reduce it to simple schemas, to the false dichotomy between the 'foreign' and the 'native' which only act to hinder our understanding of the beautiful diversity of the world, our appreciation of the wealth and potential tucked away within the folds of cultural exchanges and interactions which have conveyed, and must continue conveying the history that has made us human.[49]

Conclusion

In summary, it can be said that the theoretical and practical profiling of similarity illustrates the extent to which pluricultural societies depend on supporting social practices of handling complex diversity, rather than on the construction of closed cultures that are able to negotiate with one another through representatives. Research on similarity is about describing the proximate in processes of convergence and divergence; describing asymptotes instead of identities.

Naturally, all of this stands within the larger context of power and the asymmetrical exercise of power in contemporary global politics, because assertions of similarity defy the colonialist moment of domination that turns social differences into ontological differences through the development of colonial authority. It is at least tentatively conceivable that one could refrain from the act of interpretation that seeks to understand other cultures, and that one could tend to remain hermeneutically abstinent, as it were, in pluricultural contexts.

We adhere to the principle that it is more important to get along with one another than it is to understand one another. We can assume that many things are similar in this complex world, and content ourselves with letting indifference take its effect on difference. Thinking about similar-

ity allows us to introduce an 'uncertainty relation' into our analysis. We observe large areas of overlapping more frequently in urban situations where multilingualism has become widespread, and less so in situations where several visible differences confound our ability to judge similarities and overlaps. In this respect, and as mentioned before, considerations of similarity are based on the comprehensive importance of translation as applied to social practice. This focus places the potentialities of transformation, of metamorphosis and of transposition at the centre of social practice. Discretion and civility become important parameters of social interaction, which also allows us to bring an ethical dimension to our everyday lives: we are not exactly the same, but we are also not totally different. In this sense, it is more about a perspective of 'similarity in diversity' than the familiar demand for 'unity in diversity' – ultimately, it is about 'similarity without sameness'.

Similarity could thus be understood as a universalist, humanist perspective to be used as a '*Suchbegriff*' ('search term').[50] This also implies a criticism of the concept of 'a right to difference' that has developed under capitalism. Nationalist and fundamentalist positions both maintain and essentialize this difference. In this way, Samir Amin's polemically shaped 'right to be similar' can be understood as a critical and subversive demand that distinguishing characteristics not become factors of division.[51]

This right to similarity and solidarity, understood in opposition to the absolutization of difference though homogenization, might also imply the demand for a democratic and pluricultural way of life. Considerations of similarity thus also have cultural–political consequences. By opening the door to syncretism, linguistic diversity, multilingualism, pluriculturalism and a social state of uncertainty, work on similarities contributes to the normalization and development of perspectives found outside of the dichotomy between identity and difference.

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Notes

1 Cf. Bhatti *et al.* (2011).

2 For example, see DFG Collaborative Research Center 541, 'Identities and Alterities: The Function of Alterity for the Constitution and the Construction of Identity' ('Identitäten und Alteritäten: Die Funktion von Alterität für die Konstitution und Konstruktion von Identität'), Freiburg, 1997–2003.

3 These considerations are not only relevant for questions of cultural theory within the context of transcultural topics, they are also relevant to gender studies, and thus to another area of politics and practice: theories that saw difference as their classificatory and conceptual basis have informed feminist theory. The gender debate that has taken place since the 1980s, and particularly fields like Queer Studies, have started to abandon this concept in favour of experiments with new approaches that are indeed akin to ideas of similarity. Still, no fundamental culture theory concepts exist yet; cf. Dumiche, Gutjahr and Liska, eds (2007).

4 Huntington (1996): 21.

5 Cf. Hall (2008); Zirfas and Jörissen (2007): 243–52. See also Lotman and Uspenskij (1984).

6 Cf. Koschorke (2009); Welsch (1999).

7 Bhatti (2007); Bhatti (2009); Bhatti *et al.* (2003); Bhatti (2010); Assmann and Assmann (1990): 26. See also Brumlik (2000); Ezli (2007); Goody (2010); Kimmich (2009); Kimmich (2010); Tezcan (2010).

8 Quine (2013): 7.

9 Ibid.: 6–7.

10 Goodman (1972): 445.

11 Ibid.

12 Decock and Douven (2011): 66.

13 See note 16. Cf. Zadeh (2005); Rehkämper (2005).

14 Lakoff (1987): 10.

15 Cf. Gamm (1994).

16 Researchers such as Eleanor Rosch have suggested different versions of the prototype theory. Moreover, they have developed a mathematical model based on spatial concepts – the so-called 'Voronoi tessellations' (see this volume's cover art): 'Prototype theory builds on the observation that among the instances of a property, some are more representative than others. The most representative one is the prototype of the property. A Voronoi tessellation of a given space divides that space into a number of cells such that each cell has a centre and consists of

all and only those points that lie no closer to the centre of any other cell than to its own center; the centers of the various cells are called the *generator points* of the tessellation. Given that, by way of mathematical fact, Voronoi tessellations divide spaces into *convex* regions, a Voronoi tessellation of a conceptual space that takes points representing prototypes as generator points carves up that space into natural properties' (Decock and Douven 2011: 71; emphases in original).

[17] Ibid.: 73.

[18] Ibid.

[19] Hahn, Chater and Richardson (2003): 1.

[20] Spaemann (2011): 57.

[21] Descola (2013): 3.

[22] Here we may recall Alan Badiou's evocative ideas on 'indifferent multiplicities', from *L'Être et l'Événement*. I only have the English translation, *Being and Event,* at my disposal. In it Badiou writes: 'If truths exist, they are certainly indifferent to differences' (Badiou 2006: xii). See also the section on Leibniz (ibid.: 315–26). With regard to Leibniz, I would also refer to Vincenzo De Risi's seminal study (De Risi 2007). The definition of similarity offered by Leibniz remains important for the backdrop of our discussion. In the words of Hermann Weyl: 'Leibniz had given the geometric notion of similarity this philosophical twist: Similar, he said, are two things which are indiscernible when each is considered by itself' (Weyl 1983: 127). See also De Risi (2007): 140.

[23] Cf. Todorov (1985).

[24] Cf. the contributions in Renn, Straub and Shimada, eds (2000); Italiano and Rössner, eds (2012). See, in particular, Langenohl (2014) and Wutsdorff (2014).

[25] Schopenhauer (1974): 567.

[26] In the original translation '*Pänidentität*' is translated as 'close identity'. Cf. ibid.; Schopenhauer (1965): 666.

[27] Carnap ([1928] 2003): 180, §111. He also uses the term 'part identical'; see ibid.: 182, §113.

[28] Cf. Ambedkar's controversy with Mahatma Gandhi, reprinted in Ambedkar (2014): 347.

[29] Cf. Subrahmanyam (1997); Bayly (1989); Conrad and Randeria (2002); and the inspiring internet forum www.kakanien.ac.at. Also Haupt and Kocka, eds (2009).

[30] Cf. Herder (1989): 287; Herder (2000); Bhatti (2014).

[31] Rabindranath Tagore (1998): 84.

[32] Osterhammel (2014): xvii.

[33] Metcalf (2008): 134. 'The centrality of religious community, along with that of caste, for the British marked out India's distinctive status as a fundamentally different land.'

[34] For example, cf. Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, mentioned below (see note 38).

[35] Cf. Das and Indian National Congress ([1931] 2005): 76.

[36] Cf. ibid.: 156.

[37] Tagore (2003): 32.

[38] Azad (1991): 23ff. Also: '[O]ur manners and customs, the innumerable happenings of our daily life, everything bears the stamp of our joint endeavour. There is indeed no aspect of our life which has escaped this stamp. Our languages were different, but we grew to use a common language; our manners and customs were dissimilar, but they acted and reacted on each other, and thus produced a new synthesis. Our old dress may be seen only in ancient pictures of bygone days; no one wears it today. . . . This joint wealth is the heritage of our common

nationality, and we do not want to leave it and go back to the times when this joint life had not begun.'

[39] '[T]he distinct cultural identity of Muslims has a restricted meaning so as their distinct religious notions and ethical norms are concerned and beyond that, any mention of a distinct Muslim identity is a myth. The future of Muslims is tied up with the growth of the idea of secularism and the rise of institutions based on this idea.' Also, Ansari, ed. (2001): 280f.

[40] Cf. Amin (2008): 103.

[41] See the book review: Oates (2008).

[42] Goody (2006): 3.

[43] Ibid.: 60: 'At the broadest level, ethnocentricism divides all of us from the others and so helps to define our identity. But it is a bad guide to history, especially to world history.'

[44] Goody (2010): 42.

[45] Ibid.: 274.

[46] Conrad (2012): 1001. 'Such a rereading implies three analytical moves: First, the eighteenth-century cultural dynamics conventionally rendered as "Enlightenment" cannot be understood as the sovereign and autonomous accomplishment of European intellectuals alone; it had many authors in many places. Second, Enlightenment ideas need to be understood as a response to cross-border interaction and global integration. Beyond the conventional Europe-bound notions of the progress of "reason", engaging with Enlightenment has always been a way to think comparatively and globally. And third, the Enlightenment did not end with romanticism: it continued throughout the nineteenth century and beyond. Crucially, this was not merely a history of diffusion; the Enlightenment's global impact was not energized solely by the ideas of the Parisian philosophers. Rather, it was the work of historical actors around the world.'

[47] Ibid.: 1022.

[48] Dragonetti and Tola (2013): 293. See also the research of Harjeet Singh Gill (2007), Theodore Stcherbatsky (1996) and Uma Chattopadhyay (2012). Further inspiration may be found in the articles in Gaier, Kohl and Saviello, eds (2012).

[49] Alonso (2014): 480f. This perspective would, of course, require rigorously stopping the use of the category of 'influence'.

[50] Negt and Kluge (2001): 299. 'So that if one now varies the concept of "substance," then its antithesis becomes either the concept sought after, or the question.'

[51] Cf. Amin (1999): 42.

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