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Flashback

The Art of Comparison

Lessons from the Master, Everett C. Hughes

by Howard S. Becker

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Comparing

Comparison has always been the backbone, acknowledged or not, of good sociological thinking. Finding two or more things that are alike in some important way yet differ in other ways, looking for the further differences that create those you first noticed, looking for the deeper processes these surface differences embody – these operations create sociological knowledge of the world and give us the more abstract theories that tell us what to look for the next time out.

Finding things that are alike sounds easier than it is. There are traps. Most commonly, we think two things are alike because they have the same name: all things called schools must be alike, all things called families are the same in all important respects. Why else would we call them by the same name? But, in fact, schools differ in crucial ways and most especially in what they actually do. Some may be engaged in an activity that could charitably called "education," but many others are far more custodial in their operation. And other organizations which go by different names – prisons, for example – can easily be seen to do a great deal of educating, both the kind prison officials organize to teach inmates a useful trade and the kind inmates organize to teach each other potentially more useful trades. I leave to you the similar exercise to be done about families.

If we can not take names at face value, how do we find similar things to compare? We can do what Goffman did – in *Asylums* [Goffman 1961, see also Becker

2007] – : choose a trait that defines the category to investigate and stick with it, no matter how counter-intuitive the collection of cases it produces. But the same problem arises: how to find a trait that identifies a category about which we can make sociological interesting remarks. Goffman's example tells us to choose a trait that constrains social interaction: total institutions, on his definition, prevent the between inmates and staff who live and work in them from interacting with the outside world, and strictly regulate and minimize interaction between these two categories of inhabitants. These characteristics are easy to discover and "measure," and provoke no definitional arguments.

Why not? Because they do not coincide with our conventional categories of moral judgment, which make sure to place "incongruous cases" in their morally relevant slot. We routinely make moral judgments, one way or another, about prisons and mental hospitals, which we conventionally know to be wicked places filled with wicked people (whether we mean the inmates or the custodians), and about places like convents or military training centers, which we conventionally know to be respectable organizations. But we have no such ready-made judgments about a category which contains those four organizations, as well as submarines, ships at sea and all the other varied phenomena Goffman's definition assembles. The morally disparate character (from a conventional point of view) of these organizations which are so clearly alike in their limitation of interaction frees analysis from having to conform to conventional ideas of good and bad.

Having found a category whose interactional similarities promise to produce sociological insight, we then look for other interactionally interesting differences between them. And we look for the conditions of such differences and for their consequences. Goffman's example does not help here, because he did not make such a differentiated analysis of members of the category of total institutions. He did not pursue the differences between convents, submarines, mental hospitals, and jails. We find an example of this more complicated form of comparative analysis in Everett Hughes' probing dissection of the process of industrialization.

Some Background

Everett Hughes – student of Robert E. Park, a sociologist with a truly global perspective when that was rare – went to Germany after he finished his dissertation on real estate salesmen, and studied ethnic and religious variations in the industrial labor force [Hughes 1935]. Then he went to teach in Canada and soon interested himself in similar problems there, first in the larger economic setting of the country, then in

the province of Quebec [Hughes 1941], and finally in a year of intensive fieldwork in the small city of Drummondville, which had recently become home to two textile factories. This work produced what is probably the first major sociological study (though seldom mentioned in the history of that subdiscipline) of industrialization [Hughes 1943].

He moved to Chicago and then World War II arrived. He was immediately interested in the general question of how a war (or any other major historical event) would affect institutions, a word he used synonymously with organizations [Hughes 1942]. This overlapped with a practical problem University of Chicago researchers had been asked to help with: how to deal with an industrial labor force which managers, desperate for workers, had racially integrated over the objections of its white members. Hughes collaborated with other researchers at the University on several studies of race relations in the various war industries operating in and around Chicago [Hughes 1946]. These studies, enriched by his wide reading on a variety of related topics, provided the basis for the specific and detailed analysis presented in his book on French Canada, and for the paper I am concerned with here, which generalized his findings in this area.

The Basic Analysis

In 1949, Hughes published a paper with an accurate but unconventionally, for the time, long title: "Queries Concerning Industry and Society Growing out of Study of Ethnic Relations in Industry," which integrates the findings of his field studies and his extensive reading in a comparative analysis of processes of industrialization around the world. He first identifies two related questions, superficially different, but similar in the underlying structures they refer to. The first is factual: what is the ethnic division of labor in former colonies which have been penetrated by European and North American based industry? The second question arises in the context of a more practical and parochial concern: how to make the fullest use of the total American labor force? More bluntly, how to get rid of inequities and inefficiencies due to ethnic and racial prejudice and discrimination?

He connects these specifics, vaguely for the moment, to the most general theoretical perspective possible, saying: "Whenever one scratches a problem of racial and ethnic relations, he uncovers problems concerning society itself; and in this case, concerning industry and society." Fair warning. He will look for the most general phenomena in the specifics of a case.

To that end, he makes three sweeping generalizations, factual statements asserted as indisputably true, which serve as the major premises of the argument orienting the rest of the paper. Though few people recognize it, Hughes thought in an essentially mathematical way, frequently reasoning from a few basic premises to a variety of interesting, unexpected, but logically connected consequences. Of course, he chose premises his knowledge of this area of human activity ensured would be analytically fruitful. I do not mean that he simply deduced logical results which he then tested empirically. Of course not. Rather, he created a logical structure from which these results followed. Induction as much as deduction, seasoned with a healthy dose of intimate knowledge of the phenomenon.

The first generalization is: "Industry is always and everywhere a grand mixer of peoples." When a local area first acquires industrial organizations and forms of work, an inevitable result is ethnic and racial mixing. This seemingly innocuous observation motivates all the analysis which follows and puts the specific examples he refers to in a framework in which they stand for more than they appear to be superficially. The generalization is supported by its own chain of reasoning. Industry always precipitates a grand mixing of peoples because the indigenous population, working in a pre-industrial agricultural economy, cannot provide as many workers as industry needs. Land used for agriculture can not support the number of people an industrial plant needs, so the work force has to be imported from elsewhere. Geographically separated populations almost always differ from one another racially and/or ethnically, so the imported workers inevitably differ from the indigenes in culture as well. Slight geographical distances produce noticeable cultural differences in understandings and practices with respect to work, money, and other things that affect industrial operations (even in ethnically similar populations).

Hughes then makes a crucial distinction: between industrialization as it occurred in the mother countries of industry (in which the industrial revolution first occurred) and their colonial outposts, to which the mother countries have exported industrial patterns of organization and work which the indigenous population has no experience at all of. He immediately finds a characteristic organizational difference between the two situations in the patterns of ethnic recruitment to the industrial ranks in them. The mother countries provide the matrix of law, customs, and institutions industry needs, which are already there and working. Managers, technicians, and core skilled workers, who occupy the top positions of the industrial hierarchy, live where the factories are and are immediately available when one is built. Native to the area, and originally from the same ethnic stock, they share cultural understandings about work and, especially, the discipline of wage work. However, often enough, the new factories have to import the lower echelons of the labor force, who will do the

actual factory work. These imported workers at first come from nearby, and cultural and ethnic differences, though real enough, are essentially those between various European nations. Older, pre-industrial elites (landed, commercial and professional) may be jealous of the new industrial leaders, especially when they differ ethnically. The ethnically different industrial workers may be successfully mobile, perhaps in a second generation; or they may be more or less permanently locked into a lower position. In the latter case, politics may take on an ethnic flavor. But mobility in the factory ranks is usually some kind of possibility.

In colonies and ex-colonies, on the other hand, the people who will make up an industrial labor force already live there, but require training in the skills and discipline of industrial work. Or similarly untrained people will be imported from a third country. The upper echelons of technical and managerial people must be imported as well, since no indigenous people have the training or attitudes owners and top managers think necessary for these positions. The distinction between mother country and colony is embodied in such pairs of terms as England vs. Africa, Netherlands vs. Dutch East Indies, the United States vs. the Philippines. A minor variant occurs when rural people from the same country are imported to an urban setting to do industrial work (the situation Hughes encountered in his research in Quebec).

This distinction gives Hughes, as we will see, what he needs to understand many phenomena of industry in the colonies and then, working the comparison in both directions, in the mother countries as well. How do you pick a difference that is so analytically productive? Goffman looked for traits that affected possibilities of interaction. Hughes focused on differences between these basic situations of industrialization that affected patterns of interaction, in this case differing patterns of ethnic recruitment and their immediate consequences in the distribution of ethnicities among organizational ranks.

His second generalization says: "Modern industry, by virtue of being the great mixer, has inevitably been a colossal agent of racial, ethnic, and religious segregation." He defines segregation statistically: wherever the ethnic distribution among ranks and kinds of work differs from what might have occurred through a random assignment of people to these categories, you have segregation. Note that that this makes the term a technical rather than a moral category; in this understanding of segregation, it is not by definition a "bad" thing. Using a technical statistical definition lets Hughes note something of interest and importance, that ordinarily carries a moral charge, without having to engage in polemics about it. We should not be diverted by the feeling that we must make immediate moral judgment. Time enough for those judgments when we have a full understanding of the dynamics of the situation and of the possibilities for action of all the participants.

Many kinds of distributions can result. At an extreme, people of differing ethnicity and culture fill each rank and specialty in the industrial organization. And they remain that way, because industries seldom provide opportunities for mobility to the racially and ethnically different occupants of lower ranks. Although some may occasionally allow or even encourage such mobility, these organizations more often resemble caste systems, allowing no mobility beyond the ethnically assigned limits. Which Hughes flags as a question that needs an answer.

In the relations between industrial ranks, marked by potential and often enough actual trouble, industrial, political, religious, and ethnic conflicts can and often do merge. The empirical possibilities for misunderstandings range from simple confusions about the meaning of words to open warfare and the development of racially and ethnically based politics, with many in-between steps Hughes makes good analytic use of.

His third generalization is: "Industry is almost universally an agent of racial and ethnic discrimination. People who hire industrial workers almost always have to choose from an ethnically differentiated applicant pool, so any choice they make is inevitably an ethnic choice." If segregation is a deviation from a chance distribution, discrimination produces a deviation because the chooser considers ethnic traits even though they are irrelevant to work behavior. But segregation is not in itself evidence of discrimination. The industrial experience and training of people varies with their ethnicity, and a choice based on ethnicity may result from taking into account relevant traits which are in fact correlated with ethnicity. That makes it difficult to know when discrimination occurs. Even the person who makes the choice may not know whether or not he is discriminating.

The distinction between mother countries and colonial situations is the right comparison to make, because it emphasizes striking differences in the way what are essentially the same industrial activities are organized. Ethnic distribution among industrial ranks is the right choice for the major dimension of analysis because it affects all the other facets of interaction in the factories and communities where industrialization occurs. Hughes adds one more crucial feature: the political and social organization of the community the new factory's owners plant it in.

What We Get From Comparison

With the groundwork laid, Hughes now produces – like a magician taking flowers and rabbits out of an empty hat – a complex analysis of the relations between industrial ranks, work organization, and community structure, covering such ques-

tions as mobility, ambition, sponsorship, nepotism, and trust, and the role of government. The basic operation is simple: suppose that whatever you find in the one case will be present in the others, probably in a form different enough that we would not notice it if its presence in the first case had not alerted us to the possibility. It is what Goffman did in "Cooling the Mark Out": if confidence men have to quiet the potentially destructive actions of an angry mark whose sense of himself has been rudely disappointed, other situations in which people experience that kind of disappointment should display similar personnel and similar operations. Which he finds, for instance, in greeters in restaurants (who calm patrons who are not going to get the special treatment they think they deserve), and in the work of psychiatrists, who he suggests do the cooling out of people society has disappointed in a more general way. Hughes works his comparisons between industrial settings in both directions, letting phenomena in the colonies tell him what to look for in the mother countries, and vice versa. A good example is his analysis of the practice and meaning of mobility between ranks in industry.

Although all Western countries have ethnically differentiated hierarchies of power, skill, and prestige (in some the ethnic differences may have withered away over the years), the open class systems of the mother countries encourage mobility, so rising through the ranks is, at least in principle, possible. Workers are encouraged to be ambitious and there is perhaps just enough mobility to make that not quite foolish. Not so in colonies, where no indigenes gain entry into the inner circles of industrial prestige and control. Which has several consequences, most importantly that neither group will grasp the other's meanings and intentions. And this produces the anomalous position of the "straw boss": a management person marginal to both indigenes and the ethnically different bosses, perhaps a person of mixed ancestry, but in any case someone who knows and understands the ideas and thinking of both groups. The bosses tell him what to tell the workers and he does that, just as he lets the bosses know what the workers are thinking and saying.

> [S]uch a person will know the peculiar ways of the workers, and will deal with them accordingly. He is a liaison man, a go-between. And wherever there are workers of some kind extremely alien to industry and to the managers of industry, someone is given this function. He documents, in effect, the gap between the higher positions and the lower; and symbolizes the fact that there is no easy ladder of mobility from the lower position to the higher.

The straw boss is bilingual both literally and culturally, translating the meanings industry takes for granted into language understandable to people of a different culture. Does that job, that function, exist in the mother countries? Not by that name, but it does. Looking for it, Hughes uncovers a web of connections between ethnicity,

mobility, ambition, and trust that appears, in one form or another, in both kinds of settings.

> [In the colonial situation] the straw-boss symbolizes limited mobility. He is himself mobile, and ambitious. But the nature of his job rests on the lack of mobility of the masses. In the mother-countries, the straw-boss turns up, too. He is found wherever some new and strange element is introduced into the labor force in number. The Negro personnel man [in U.S. industry in the 1940s] is one of the latest strawbosses; he acts as a liaison man between management and Negro help. He cannot himself be considered a candidate for any higher position or for any line position in industry; his is a staff position which exists only so long as Negroes are hired in fairly large numbers, and so long as Negro help is considered sufficiently different from other help to require special liaison. If the race line disappeared, or tended to disappear in industry, there would be no need of the Negro personnel man.

Hughes transforms "straw boss" from a term of industrial argot into an analytic concept applicable in all industrial settings where people of differing cultures meet--and remember that his first big generalization was that industry always produces cultural mixing.

Hughes compared examples from his own research in Chicago industry in wartime (the example of the Negro personnel man) and from his work in the textile factories of quasi-colonial Quebec to generate a new concept for understanding industrial organization, a new "telltale" which alerts us to basic organizational phenomena. In addition, he surely relied on what he learned from the work of his students – e.g., Melville Dalton's research on the kinds of ethnic loyalties or lack thereof required in U.S. business organizations [Dalton 1959, 199] – as well as on his voluminous reading in the literature of colonialism.

The straw boss provokes questions about ambition: just how ambitious is it appropriate for workers to be? Industry thinks workers should be ambitious – sometimes. But industry (like society more generally) is ambivalent about ambition – a topic Hughes [1947, 212-219] returned to repeatedly, complaining when it is absent and also complaining when people are too ambitious. Does industry really want the ambition it claims to look for in everyone? What proportion of ambitious people can an organization absorb without trouble? He notes an organization in which managers speak of the "Thank God for people," who are content to remain where they are.

Controlling Groups Want to Be Able to Trust their Members.

In the colonial or semicolonial industrial regions, management often quite frankly talks of the necessity of keeping management in loyal hands; that is, in the

hands of people closely identified with one another by national sentiment as well as by general cultural background. In the mother-countries of industry, one does not hear such talk, but it is possible that the mechanism operates without people being aware of it. It may operate through the mechanism of sponsoring, by which promising young people are picked and encouraged in their mobility efforts by their superiors. In the course of their rise, they are not merely given a technical training, but also are initiated into the ways and sentiments of the managerial group and are judged by their internal acceptance of them. The highest, most powerful ranks in industry confine power in the hands of people thought to be loyal not merely to the particular organization but to the managerial class and its culture. They take ethnicity as an accurate indication of that cultural loyalty.

Having raised the question of sponsoring power, Hughes looks for it elsewhere and, sure enough, points out the sponsoring power of lower ranks, who often control recruitment to their own ranks by suggesting "trustworthy" people from their village or family as recruits when openings at their own level occur. Stereotypes about what different groups are "good at" grow and persist. Hughes covers other topics in this short paper, though by no means all those dealt with at length in the monograph on Quebec, which also analyzes religion, family structure, class structure, community organization in and between ethnic groups, and politics. All of these are amenable to the same kind of comparative development (and in fact many are dealt with in some of the other papers in his comprehensive collection *The Sociological Eye*).

Questions of Method

I have identified some of the crucial steps in the process of comparison, but have not begun to answer all the questions raised by Hughes' practice, and will not here; it's a big topic. These seem to me the chief operations calling for further exploration and specification:

1. How do we choose the right cases to compare? How do we find oppositions as fruitful as mother country of industry and colonial setting?

2. How do we choose the right dimensions to compare, dimensions as fruitful as the ethnic division of labor?

3. Most difficult, perhaps, how do we find the sometimes seemingly insignificant events or social types that connect a variety of general phenomena fruitfully, as the phenomenon of the straw boss did for Hughes?

It is clear, when you read Hughes or Goffman, both masters of this kind of comparison, that they knew all sorts of odd facts, esoteric stories, historical oddities

– things we don't have to know to set examinations for our students, did not have to know for the examinations we took ourselves when we were students, the things we think "every sociologist ought to know." Those conventional requirements, while no doubt necessary for some purposes, mirror the limited range of things sociologists already think important, and are unlikely to contain the kinds of references that not only enlivened the prose of these masters, but also gave them the theoretical purchase that produced new ideas and connections. Since students inevitably spend so much time learning what they "must know," it is no surprise that they do not read widely in other areas (particularly as the "literature" of conventional sociology continues to increase exponentially). Nor, as Harvey Molotch [1994] has pointed out, do students have the time or inclination to venture beyond the walls of their own quasi-total institution, the university. Such ventures would give them the breadth of examples fruitful comparisons demand.

Not only do students not have the breadth of experience and knowledge to produce unconventional comparisons, they surely have learned, as would-be professionals, to ignore their own random impulses of unconventional comparison. It is hard to imagine a student today who would compare, as Hughes loved to do, prostitutes, priests, and psychiatrists, and so discover the dimension of "guilty knowledge" he found so interesting (knowledge of their client's secrets and possibly illicit behavior). I think, rather, that students would consult the literature on professions and come up with a list of conventionally defined professions as the basis for a comparative analysis.

I can not produce any formulae that will solve these problems automatically. The requirements for doing comparisons well are irreducibly idiosyncratic, time-consuming, and dependent on possessing a sort of random array of knowledge that conventional graduate training does not give us.

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The Art of Comparison

Lessons from the Master, Everett C. Hughes

Abstract: Everett Hughes made use of his extensive knowledge of the structure of industry, both in the countries where it had originated and in the colonies to which those countries then exported it, as the basic material for a comparative analysis of the relations between industry and society. He focused on ethnic divisions of labor arising from the necessity to import labor for the more intensive styles of work industry makes use of, on how industry mixes peoples but also segregates them and is an agent of ethnic discrimination. From these considerations he produces interesting and unexpected generalizations about such topics as the relation between industrial organization and community structure. His comparative method has inspired many other essays in the same genre, notably Goffman's *Asylums*. Hughes' analysis suggests answers to deep questions of comparative method (how to choose cases and dimensions to study, for example).

Keywords: E.C. Hughes, comparison, method, industry, colonialism.

Howard S. Becker is the author of many books and articles in the sociology of deviance, the professions and the arts, including *Outsiders* (1963) and *Art Worlds* (1982). His most recent book is *Do you Know? The Jazz Repertoire in Action* (2010, with. R. Faulkner). He lives in San Francisco.