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COMPARISON IN A WORLD OF RESEMBLANCES, FLOWS, AND PROXIMITIES

Anthropologists compare—this lies at the heart of what we do as we try and make sense of, describe, and explain human social being in all its diversity. But the use of comparison extends far beyond anthropology. Indeed, it seems ubiquitous across the board, even necessary, and richly generative in and for a meaningful social world. In that sense, comparison is a fitting theme for this conference, and I am delighted to have the opportunity to systematically think it through here.

I will do this by focusing on two concepts: freedom and decolonisation. Both traverse academic, peri-academic, and non-academic spaces and are transformed and transform as they move through or settle in these spaces. We can compare how they work or are mobilised in different spaces. I will track these and show how the two classic orientations of anthropological comparison—sameness and difference, tending at their limits towards identity and alterity—while productive, do not do justice to how these concepts play out on the ground. We need other terms that are much more attuned to resemblances, intensities, and flows. These are no less comparative, but perhaps less dramatic.

COMPARISON IN ANTHROPOLOGY: THE PULL OF THE MIDDLE GROUND

In *Comparison: The Impossible Method,* Matei Candea (2019) argues that comparison is one of anthropology's core methods and opens its possibilities and paradoxes to keen and thorough scrutiny. In doing so, he offers a cautiously hopeful approach to rigorous forms of comparison that are always multiple even if phrased as dual. Inherently, multiple anthropological comparisons, Candea (2019) shows, oscillate between frontal (us and them) and lateral (side by side) choices, between hidden reflexivities and hidden objectivities, between finding sameness and finding difference. These choices of and for comparison push towards their limits, each with a paired opposite, such as us/them, identity/alterity, solipsism/objectivity. Candea (2019) further argues that from its inception, the discipline of anthropology has been punctuated by a ceasuristic—that is, what has come before should be done away with—style that announces radically new methods or purposes. Ceasuristic revolutions, he argues, are usually based on some form of comparison that pushes towards limits. We might think about the contrast between the many worlds approach of the ontological turn and the one world, many worldviews approach of anthropological frameworks that emphasise underlying unity rather than radical alterity.

However—and this is important—critical attention based on regional, sub-field specific, or thematic comparisons can, he argues, cause a constant pulling back from conceptual limits to the thick middle ground of ethnographic encounters and descriptions. Even so, the new forms of comparison each

ceasuristic revolution advocates become folded into the anthropological toolkit, joining extant comparative and other methods to become heuristic tools that are good enough, if not perfect, for particular purposes. Such tools also shape those purposes, and each tool has its own in-built limitations. Tools, including those of comparison, then demand a double, even triple, attention to what they can and cannot do as well as in terms of their orientations—what they aim towards.

As the limits of particular tools and their vectors are discovered, we drop back collectively into the middle ground of caveated claims before setting off again and so on. It is not the same middle, of course, because new ways of thinking and fresh objects have been brought into it, expanding it and generating new knowledge. In other words, while remaining at the extremes may not be sustainable, attempts to get there shape and reshape the discipline. What I want to argue today is that smaller comparative steps track resemblances, changes, flows, translations, and transformations to generate important anthropological knowledge in more nuanced and less combative ways. This is the kind of comparison that I undertake in my own discussions of freedom and decolonisation.

Before I do that, though, I want to turn to a recent volume on comparison in the world. This is because it is not only anthropologists who compare. As I said at the outset, people, including my interlocutors to whom I will introduce you soon, do so, too, for all kinds of reasons. It is useful, then, to think about what comparison does in the world.

COMPARISON IN THE WORLD: WHAT IT DOES

In *How People Compare,* edited by Mathjis Pelkmans and Harry Walker (2023), we see how comparison is mobilised in Melanesia, Amazonia, Indonesia, Kyrgyzstan, the UK, and South Africa by diverse people including professional comparers such as journalists, development practitioners, and debt advisors. The demands for rigour are different here when compared to anthropology, but the work that comparison does is equally rich and productive. Indeed, Nick Long (2023) sagely points out that a comparison does not have to be good to be productive. It can be faulty, based on bad logic, and still 'work' for the purposes of the comparer.

To ground this point, let me provide an example of a conversation I had with a research participant, a self-identified right-winger in England. He was telling me that British colonialism was fundamentally a good thing. He would never hear a bad word about it. I countered this by giving him some examples from India, including a personal one from my own family. His response was: 'Well, most of it was good. Anyway, we were better than the Belgians or the French' (see Venkatesan 2024).

There are at least three kinds of comparison at play here. Firstly, it is possible to compare between good and bad aspects of colonialism to arrive at a balanced conclusion (as if it is possible to make a balance sheet between 4 million deaths by famine and the introduction of railways!). Secondly, someone else can always be worse. Finally, there is the kind of comparison that ensues in a dialogue where 'I' am more knowledgeable than 'you' by dint of positionality, history, or some other feature that I possess and you do not. This makes my account more authoritative than yours. This latter comparison informed my own strategy.

I will discuss later the kind of fieldwork that I do that allows me to challenge research participants up to a point (rather rare in anthropological research). But, for now, I simply want us to think about how, notwithstanding its problems, this dialogue is rich in comparisons that fulfil multiple and different purposes for each participant. *How People Compare* is full of similar discussions of what comparison does in the social world. Just to name a few things, it is used to motivate; to claim uniqueness by a double move of comparing and refusing to be compared; to distinguish between 'us' and 'them' and between 'you' and 'me'; to claim status; to reassure; and to plan. Indeed, so crucial does it seem that Michael Scott (2023) in that same volume argues that comparison is the universal means of composition.

Another theme that runs throughout the volume resonates with widespread recognition within anthropology of human beings as meaning-makers. And, indeed, in the various articles, we see how people, whether as individuals or collectively, make meaning by comparing. Indeed, meaning-making may involve intervention to shape things so as to be comparable. Thus, a wonderful Hindu originary myth recounted by Davis (1991) runs as follows.

The creator god vomited out all the beings of the world. But what resulted were creatures so similar that nothing could be done with them because they just formed a lump. In another version of the myth, the creatures are so different that they wander off with no common purpose or means of engagement. He then created the Brahmin who performed an ordering sacrifice that made the creatures neither so similar as to form an undifferentiated mass nor so different that they could not relate to one another. Resemblance of the right kind, then, is a prerequisite for a productive generative world.

There is an interesting thought here for anthropologists in terms of how we generate meaning through ordering—and where we might want to reach neither for identity nor alterity, but for resemblance.

And it is with an eye to resemblance and the small differences that make a difference that I approach the two concepts about which I have been thinking for a while now and upon which I will now focus: freedom and decolonisation. Both concepts have and continue to traverse the world (often in English, and, also, to draw on Tom Boellstorff's 2025 Westermarck lecture also printed in this issue, often translated and dubbed with different effects) and are mobilised in all kinds of contexts. For the anthropologist who wants to work with them, comparison is crucial because both concepts acquire different meanings and are associated with particular concerns in different settings that are nonetheless proximate, sometimes overlapping. Indeed, like culture, their movement to and from academia means working with them requires the kind of rigour that attends to anthropology at home. We are at home in these concepts and need to be estranged from them to see them afresh. In that sense, the self/other and me/you distinctions are productive, even ethical, even if the distinctions are miniscule or very fine-grained, and mainly to do with purposes rather than originary points. In keeping with the theme of the conference, I will show both how interlocutors mobilise comparison within each site and also my own anthropological work of comparison between them that connects and separates them in multiple ways.

FREEDOM

I started thinking about freedom in the early 2000s. This is because James Laidlaw's (2002)

article, 'For an Anthropology of Ethics and Freedom', resonated with my work on the 'free gift' among Muslim householders and later Hindu householder—priests in Tamilnadu India. I showed that non-reciprocity could be ethical or involuntary and based on esteem or need—these distinctions could make the recipient feel profoundly free or unfree (Venkatesan 2016).

All of this was in Tamilnadu, and freedom and unfreedom were my gloss on words and described affects in Tamil, with some in Sanskrit and Arabic.

I increasingly wanted to work with freedom in the English language. This was partly because I was thinking about two questions raised by Webb Keane (2014: 447) about how anthropologists look for and find freedom. Do research participants need to have freedom concepts or notions of freedom for anthropologists to discover them, or is this 'our' concept and, if so, how widely applicable is it?

But what is 'our' concept of freedom? The word is certainly used widely and is the subject of much debate in the Euro-American tradition. But what meaning does it convey to different people? How does its usage map on to the rich tradition of theorising freedom in European thought? I was also galvanised by the fact that few anthropologists at the time were thinking about freedom in English usage ethnographically. Most were suspicious of the word, because it felt too 'individualistic' and atomistic. Was it though?

It seemed clear to me that ethnographic research on freedom would be interesting, even necessary given the word's uptake not only in anticolonial and other progressive movements, but also in a number of Anglophone sites by the populist right amongst whom research seemed crucial given their growing reach at the time. My other reason for focusing on freedom was to think about the relationship between freedom and ethics, so crucial to Laidlaw's (2002) work, and extend it to think about politics and diverse publics (Venkatesan 2023).

Before I turn to my ethnographic discussions, let me just define some of my key terms.

- Ethics concerns answers to the question, 'What ought I do or be?' (Laidlaw 2002, 2013). This question may be posed at the level of the individual or the collective.
- Ethical endeavours are those which seek to change 'what is', into a vision of 'what ought to be' where the latter is, upon reflection, considered good or right.
- Ethical freedom, here, is the exercise of one's capacity to act in order to realise this vision. Such an exercise does not have to be successful; the fact that it is able to be exercised is what is important, especially in the public sphere where it may collide with other ethical visions.

Importantly, the anthropologist does not have to agree with the posited vision to recognise it as an ethical endeavour.

In what follows, I will draw on the above to compare the ways in which the concept of freedom is mobilised and takes shape in four different sites in England, two based on my own ethnographic research and two based on ethnographic research by Meadhbh McIvor (2020). I will tease out the ways in which the concept of freedom becomes a matter of concern in diverse proximate sites that have much in common and yet are also distinct in approaches to the world and in terms of the kind of world each seeks to bring about. As we will see, in pluralist liberal spaces, such as the UK, few people may feel free. Freedom can become a rallying cry for all kinds of people precisely because they feel unable to do the ethical thing by their lights. The point I want to make is that

tracking freedom in this way allows us to see how the same kinds of ideas are taken up and transformed in different spaces allowing us to focus on resemblances and intensities rather than on radical alterity or identity.

'FRIENDS OF FREEDOM' (FOF)

I began ethnographic research among an organisation in England, which I will call 'Friends of Freedom' (FoF), whose logo prominently displays the word freedom. Indeed, I decided to work with them because freedom was central to their own work. This research took place between 2015 and 2021. Self-described as a classic liberal pressure group, FoF promotes the furtherance of free markets and personal liberties. They described these in ethical terms—as good and right and as part of a push to fight against what they described as threats to freedom. All my research participants self-described as economically right-wing and a number of them identified as libertarian or classic liberals. Free market, small state economists Friedrich Hayek and Milton Friedman are their heroes, as are Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan. FoF ran one of the large 'Leave' campaigns in the referendum on Britain's membership in the European Union, working closely with several other Leave campaigns. Throughout my research, Brexit was very much a live issue and FoF organised several very well-attended events.

Members of FoF include 80-year-olds and university students, but most are men in the 50s to 70s age range. Most members are from so-called middle England—white, owners of small- to medium-sized businesses, or white-collar professionals. Many are nationalist, and all oppose a large state. Many people at the time of my research were members of the Conservative Party, UKIP or, from 2019, the Brexit party, and were involved in party political work, some at a high level. A few people had originally worked in Westminster as aides or advisors and frequently moved between different free market-supporting organisations. 'Freedom-loving' politicians were frequently invited to the organisation's events. Representatives from free trade think tanks and various lobbying groups—for lower taxes, a relaxation of tobacco laws, and so on—also regularly attended.

FoF folk discussed freedom a lot. In these discussions, philosophers like Rousseau, Paine, J. S. Mill, and Nozick were frequently brought up, usually in relation to their arguments for freedom and against government. The most frequently invoked name, though, was Isaiah Berlin. His (1969) two senses of freedom—positive and negative—resonated. Broadly put, positive freedom refers to the freedom to be or do something. Negative freedom, by contrast, refers to the freedom from interference, usually in the liberal sense, by government. Like Berlin himself who saw in the invocation of positive freedom the possibility of totalitarianism, FoF folk who raised this contrast always fell firmly on the side of negative freedom, identifying positive freedom with communism and socialism. These were the spectres against which they frequently positioned themselves.

But, perhaps inevitably, because theirs was a positive political project aimed at freeing markets, downsizing the state, and enabling individual liberties including driving, smoking, and various other things without government interference, the spoken commitment to negative freedom frequently did not carry through in practice. There were also frequent disagreements between more nationalist right-wingers and libertarians on matters such as immigration. The former did not want more migrants, the latter argued that the free movement of labour depressed wages and

made markets more competitive. Interestingly, the more time I spent with FoF members, the more people told me that they did not know exactly what freedom was, although they were quite clear about specific freedoms. Much of the organisation's work consisted in bringing various discontents with the current state of affairs under the banner of threats to freedom and proposing free market or non-EU solutions to them.

FoF's work also involved taking specific stands against 'unfreedoms': state surveillance, EU membership, desires for the state to act on public health or climate change, political correctness, 'wokeness', and other forms of constraint upon speech or actions. I began to see FoF as a living palimpsest, drawing upon, combining, and overwriting debates between liberal philosophers about freedom with its own understanding of freedom against what it identified as the unfreedom of various aspects of the world that they felt mattered.

Freedom here is the result of comparison and composition, and the 'free person' emerges as a very particular kind of economically right-wing individual. This understanding excludes other possibilities of the free person based on anticolonial, anticapitalist, or left-wing models. These exclusions give freedom a particular meaning.

But even in this right-wing space, there were different competing versions of the free person or the free polity because of real differences between libertarian, nationalist, and nativist approaches to markets, personal freedoms, migration, and trade. What looks like a singular identity—the right-wing freedom-lover—breaks up under closer scrutiny into a number of specific ways of being this kind of person. They resemble each other but are not identical. This confers certain advantages—there is enough commonality to present a united front (supporting Brexit, for instance), without collapsing generative differences that animate and shape the organisation, keeping it lively and, as one interlocutor put it, 'fun'.

'PHILOSOPHY IN PUBS' (PIP)

After wrapping up my research with FoF, I began research amongst a community philosophy movement, 'Philosophy in Pubs' (PiP) in 2022. I was still interested in freedom, but wanted to explore it in non-explicitly political settings and in a more philosophical register.

PiP was founded over 20 years ago in Liverpool. One founder who is now in his mid-70s told me that he had been working as a bricklayer for many years. At some point in his 40s, he decided he wanted to really think about things in ways he had never been taught in school. He attended classes in philosophy, eventually earning a degree in philosophy, and ended up teaching in adult education. He found this as unsatisfying as he did school in terms of promoting thinking. As a result, he started PiP with two other men who were similarly discontented. There are now around 10 groups just in the greater Liverpool area and 50 around the UK. These groups meet regularly, in person or online in some cases since the pandemic, to do philosophy or to philosophise.

The group that I attend meets every week on Tuesday evenings in a popular local pub. Like FoF, this is a mainly male, white demographic with a diverse age range, with some clusters in their mid-30s and their mid- to late-70s. Unlike FoF, though, a number of people identify as working class. Every 10 or 12 weeks, we decide together on topics or what are called 'enquiries' for the next 10 to 12 weeks. These can be big questions—'What is mind?' or 'death and the meaning of life'—or vexed topical questions—'Is anti-whiteness destroying society?' or 'Is

a transwoman a woman?' I participate in the weekly discussion alongside everyone else, whilst visibly taking copious and more or less verbatim notes. Hence, my use of the term 'we' is deliberate, although there is also an implicit 'they' whose interest is not anthropological.

Each week, the person who proposed the specific enquiry presents it at the beginning of the session, often circulating a short, written text before beginning. Everyone is invited to give their first thought. This is followed by a general discussion, with people raising their hands to speak. Final thoughts from each participant close the session, which lasts two hours. Most people leave after the enquiry, but some linger to carry on the discussion. There is no instruction or authority figure, just a facilitator who guides discussions with a very light touch (see Venkatesan 2023). This is frequently described as a working-class ethos of participation (the implicit comparison is with a more formal educational space or with what is described as middle-class formality).

Every pub philosopher I have met (in my group, from other groups, at national or regional symposia, or at annual Christmas parties) is committed to thinking critically and well as a value in and of itself. This means three things in practice:

- being prepared to have one's thinking critically examined,
- being willing to listen attentively to others, and
- being willing to change one's mind upon reflection.

These are understood to refine and develop one's capacity to think better, freeing one's thought from habituation and socialisation.

There are some things that stand out. PiP is not an echo chamber. Regulars at my group include staunch Christians, material realists, non-religious but spiritually minded people, small c conservatives, social progressives, climate change sceptics, environmentalists, conspiracy theorists, Marxists, and libertarians. The space is also not straightforwardly right-wing or left-wing—people have very different views on different issues. This makes it hard to classify them according to this binary. They themselves struggle to do so, even though some keep trying, if only to differentiate themselves from what they understand as the alt-right or the extreme left when expressing certain views.

The committed work of pub philosophers can be understood as a practice of ethical freedom. There is a purpose: to think clearly and well about big and vexing things for oneself with others. There is also a discontent: both a general one that critical thinking is not valued as it should be as well as a personal one, 'I could be thinking better about this.' There is a vision: to spread the movement, making critical thinking part-and-parcel of a wide variety of people's engagement with the world, especially people from the working classes who are understood as discouraged from thinking and speaking. The ethical freedom here is to put in the work to transform one's self, and if possible the world. In that sense, it resembles FoF's project, albeit there are differences in content—PiP is oriented more towards self than towards world transformation, and it is less concerned with promoting a certain conception of freedom even though the term freedom comes up time and again in various enquires.

Now that we have seen how FoF conceptualises freedom, are there resonances with pub philosophers' conceptualisation of the same term? I will focus on one enquiry: What is freedom? On that day there were 12 of us: 9 men and 3 women including me.

As in Friends of Freedom, Isaiah Berlin's positive and negative freedoms immediately came up and were problematised. One woman

argued that in neoliberal society there was too much focus on personal negative freedoms, although people had very little freedom to change the system. Another man wanted to add 'freedom of' to 'freedom from' and 'freedom to'. Freedom was often tied to specific things, he argued. Take freedom of speech, for example. It is very important, but speakers need to take responsibility for the consequences of their speech. The other philosopher who was quickly invoked was J. S. Mill, with one man bringing up his argument that one's own freedom should not impede another's. Milton Friedman too came up much later—someone cautioned us, as he did, that we should be careful that protecting people does not lead to unfreedom. So far, we are in a liberal landscape, not dissimilar to FoF, but the mention of responsibility had stuck.

One man argued that:

> Freedom is choice… Freedom comes with responsibility and respect. Without these, there is no freedom. It's a very ethical idea—[you] have to listen, understand, try and get into their head. You have to have respect. What is good for you is not necessarily good for someone else.

Another said: 'I want to add obligation to responsibility and respect'.

This led to a range of discussions about the relationship between freedom, responsibility, obligations, and rights including those of others. A general consensus emerged around the idea that freedom was a good thing, but freedom without any constraints would lead, variously, to insanity, anarchy, or a free for all. Some limitations were needed—these would never be perfect and would have to be reassessed time and again.

But what was freedom exactly? Most people agreed that it was choice, but a special kind of choice limited by a number of considerations. These could be legal (having to follow the highway code when driving), moral (which one man defined as other-regardingness), or ethical (based on reflected upon understandings of the good and right). A number of people argued that freedom was necessary—one could not assign or accept responsibility without some notion of freedom. One woman argued that freedom opens up the possibility of the future; it was the capacity to ask why and imagine otherwise.

Some things stand out. As in FoF, people found it quite hard to define freedom; the closest equivalent was choice. But, unlike FoF, this was not choice in terms oriented to the market or to non-interference. Rather, the pub philosophers thought about choices in terms of balancing self-realisation with other-regardingness. The main question that emerged seemed to be: How can we be free in a world shared with others, and when should freedom be restricted and by whom? Indeed, this became the subject of a later enquiry.

As I listened and went over my notes later, I was groping towards a set of questions that seemed to underlie the two approaches to freedom that I have discussed so far. These centred around the relationship between choices, reflection, and ethical conduct including political engagement, especially with regards to diverse social injunctions and invitations. But these thoughts were inchoate until I read Meadhbh McIvor's (2020; also see my forthcoming review, 2026) ethnography of Evangelical Christians in Britain: *Representing God*.

CHRISTIAN FREEDOMS IN LIBERAL SETTINGS

McIvor (2020) conducted research at two field sites in London. The first took place at the Christian Legal Centre (CLC), which provides

legal advice and litigates cases on behalf of Christians who feel their freedom to practice their religion is denied on legal or legalistic grounds. The second is 'Christ Church', a well-attended, largely white, middle-class church.

All the Christians in McIvor's research follow the same kind of Evangelical Christianity, which emphasises that salvation results from faith alone. They also agree that Christians are already free because of the grace of God. This means, they argue, that unlike religions of the law (they mention Judaism and Islam), there are no God-given rules that Christians must follow to be saved. They describe their freedom as freedom under grace and these other religions as promising freedom under law.

But being already free does not mean freedom to act in any way and both fine-grained judgements and disagreements abound. Fault-lines between the CLC and various Christ Church members about freedom as Christians and for Christians sharpened my own thoughts and shed fresh light on my thinking about ethical freedom. I came to formulate two questions that seemed to animate McIvor's research participants as well as mine, with different answers in each case, albeit all pointing to some understanding of the good and right and making some reference to freedom. These are:

B*ecause I can do something, ought I*?
And,
Ought I do something that is prohibited or, conversely, mandatory in my role?

Versions of both questions came up a lot in both McIvor's sites and were met with different forms of reflection and rationalisation. For example, 'I have been invited to my gay colleague's party. Ought I go?' Or, 'As a registrar, can I refuse to perform marriages that go against my Christian faith?' While individuals decide for themselves, there are guidelines that promote reflection and enable decision-making as Christians. These are clearly outlined by the Christ Church pastor, who suggested that congregants ask themselves a number of questions before deciding on the right course of action. These are: What does the Bible say? What does my conscience say? What is the effect of my decision on other Christians? How does this further the gospel? How does it affect my spiritual journey?

It should be immediately clear that we are in a space of ethical freedom as people work out what they ought to do in light of opportunities, prohibitions, or instructions. And, they do not always arrive at the same conclusions, for example, about whether Christians should be able to wear crosses at work even if non-mandatory jewellery is disallowed.

CLC fights cases on the basis that disallowing the cross impinges on their clients' right to religious freedom. Members of Christ Church worry that this rights-based approach equates Christianity with what they call religions of the law in which they argue certain religious clothing and jewellery (e.g., hijab, kara, turban) are mandatory. As a pastor put it, Christian freedom ought to be approached relationally ('Is this a loving thing to do as a Christian?') rather than legalistically ('I should have the right to do this as a Christian because of my freedom of religion').

Very similar questions have arisen in both PiPs and FoF, albeit without reference to Christianity. For example, should I exercise my freedom of speech to tell a religious person their religion is just wrong, or should I respect their faith and keep quiet? Is it better to be right or to be kind? Ought I refrain from smoking in my own car because there is someone else present in it who objects? Ought I accept a transwoman as a woman? I conclude my discussion on freedom with a few general points based on comparing

these four sites.

Firstly, in all cases where freedom is invoked in the ethical register, we find comparisons with something identified as unfree or less free. This is because the given project is articulated as the best, or even just the better choice, amongst a host of available choices. These comparisons flesh out the content of freedom in each case. We see how particular kinds of subjects emerge: the loving Christian, the rights-bearing Christian, the right-wing freedom-lover, the free philosophical thinker.

Secondly, freedom is not a one-off achievement. We see an ongoing process of figuring out stances and ethical responses and attempts to enact choices. This causes further differentiation within what, on the surface, looks like singular identities: Evangelical Christians, economic right-wingers, or working-class thinkers.

Thirdly, ecosystems matter. There are broad similarities in all of these approaches to freedom. This reflects the fact that all these groups and individuals are responding in different ways to debates over the past 50 years, which have pushed and pulled liberalism in England in various directions. We have seen that both FoF and PiP folk directly refer to Berlin's two senses of freedom. Whilst her interlocutors do not, McIvor (2020: 148) too draws on Berlin to argue that the anxiety that people feel in both her field sites map on to 'English Law's transformation from framing religious freedom as a negative liberty—that is the law's protection of religion from state encroachment—to one where it is seen as a positive right requiring state enforcement'. In other words, a different sense of freedom has come into play in England, one that affects all four sites discussed. Co-location and shared histories often give us resemblances rather than alterity or identity. It is harder to find clear water between positions, and people move between different spaces available to them. Indeed, I have seen CLC lawyers at FoF events notwithstanding definite differences between Christian and liberal approaches to the world. My regular pub philosophers' group is sometimes attended by an Evangelical Christian, who is not dissimilar to some of McIvor's research participants; and it would be no stretch to encounter pub philosophers in FoF or perhaps even volunteering for CLC.

Finally, the two questions that I articulated around 'ought I' might potentially provide the grounds for an anthropology of ethics that might appeal even to anthropologists who are suspicious of freedom as a concept. Comparisons that do not tend to the limit and which stay in the middle ground, then, can provide new directions for anthropology that are not necessarily ceasuristic.

DECOLONISATION

We have seen how freedom, even when the anthropologist and research participants share the same language, is not so easy to grasp or pin down. Let's turn to another similarly complex word that has adherents and detractors—and they do not necessarily look like we expect them to.

Decolonisation is a much more jargonistic word than freedom, what Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui (2020) calls 'an ugly neologism'. It has become common parlance in diverse academic, peri-academic, governance, and activist spaces around the world. By comparing different usages, I will ask, as I did in my book *Decolonising Anthropology* (Venkatesan 2024), what a comparative approach to the term can reveal and why such an approach might require us to be a bit more circumspect about it.

When decolonisation is restricted to the political sense—the transfer of sovereign power from colonial state to new nation-state—it

has a pretty clear scope. But the story does not end there. As various scholars, including Ashis Nandy (1998 [1983]) and Albert Memmi (2003 [1957]), have shown, colonialism changed both coloniser and colonised in some fundamental ways that stretch from the shape of institutions to the very psyche. Decolonisation then takes on much larger and fuzzier resonances. Broadly put, as currently conceived, it often appears to involve one of two comparative moves.

The first revolves around alterity—which supposes and seeks to return to a radically different pre-colonial past or which informs a radically different post-colonial future. The second tends towards identity—all formerly colonised people are oppressed in similar ways, and can be grouped together often by race, specifically non-whiteness. Alternatively, almost all oppression can be pinned directly or indirectly to one common source: historical colonialism.

It is good to be careful, though.

For one thing, the historical record reveals that people have systematically oppressed others for gain or on the grounds of superiority, albeit not on the same scale as European colonisation. Some of these forms still persist, for example, caste-based oppression. For another thing, notwithstanding important similarities, the processes and instantiations of European colonisation varied in different parts of the world, which were themselves rather different. So, what Benoît de L'Estoile (2008) terms colonial legacies vary as do modes of engaging them.

In addition, how people have understood decolonisation is comparable, but not identical; in some cases, it is not even similar. For example, in India, the term is increasingly used to block progressive movements for issues like gay or women's rights or certain kinds of liberal critiques on the grounds that these are colonial imports. In the UK, decolonisation is mobilised in attempts to achieve racial and other forms of justice. US scholars Tuck and Yang (2012) argue that the term decolonisation should only refer to the repatriation of land to its Indigenous peoples, and that it should not be used as a metaphor when seeking to address other social ills.

These are only three examples of differences. So, one way to think about decolonisation is to approach it ethnographically. As Francis Nyamnjoh (2016: 129) argues, '(…) decolonization cannot be articulated in abstraction'. Contexts—that is, location, history, and specific concerns—matter and these can be compared.

But today I want to suggest another approach to decolonisation, which involves taking a big step back from historical colonisation to think through a more abstract formulation based on what Gerber (2018) calls the logic of the coloniser. This, I suggest, allows for comparisons based on resemblances and flows that go beyond the binary of historical coloniser and colonised.

Gerber (2018) argues that at the heart of the logic of the coloniser is domination through a claim to the Unity of Being. This claim is contained in and reaches its apogee in a particular figure that is placed at the centre. This central figure identifies with itself all that is good, true, right, and valuable in Universalist terms—that is, it claims the quality of being true in and appropriate for all circumstances. Everything else is defined and dominated by this centre according to a similarity with or difference from it, generating hierarchies. Europe once claimed the centre, but it is now possible to see similar claims in post-colonial states with the figure of Europe replaced by the nation, a particular religion or race, or a similar universalising figure or 'social body'. For example, in contemporary

India, the centre is occupied and defined by the middle to high caste Hindu male. His values are understood as the values of the nation. Those who do not accept the universalising claims of this central figure or who are understood as its other may suffer a similar fate to colonialism's others. They may be exploited, dispossessed, and subjected to surveillance, re-education, and control. In the worst case, they may be treated as *damne* (Maldonado-Torres 2007)—that is, subjects forged in the non-ethics of war.

In other words, the logic of the coloniser may persist long after political decolonisation. Not only that, those following this logic may define themselves precisely by opposition to historical colonisation, claiming to be decolonising, but without aiming towards the progressive or inclusive ideals that are often associated with decolonisation. We might then want a different comparative framework, focusing on what Candea (2019) calls intensities—that is, the way things transform into other things through processes that may be tracked. So, we might ask:

- Does the old centre maintain its dominance? How?
- If there is a new centre, how does it constitute itself?
- What kinds of inspirations and tools/devices from the old centre are redeployed?
- What are the new elements added?
- Who now occupies the peripheries and how are they kept there?

Paying attention to these kinds of questions can reveal that colonial legacies on the ground do not necessarily lend themselves to simple binaries that divide up straightforwardly into nasty European coloniser and oppressed non-European colonised. Rather, what we might see is the continuation of the logic of the coloniser and a variety of projects on the ground that reproduce colonial logics in different ways. The focus here is no less comparative, but it lies more on resemblances than on opposed entities. Such work can reveal complex imbrications, new forms of distinction and composition, and projects of meaning-making that are formed, in Anand Pandian's (2008) words, from traditions in fragments, sometimes from around the world. The challenge then becomes one of dismantling these colonial logics, whoever might be imposing them (for a more detailed discussion, see Venkatesan 2024).

CONCLUSION

Comparison is necessary for the composition of and meaning-making in the world. Given this, people compare in all kinds of ways and for all kinds of purposes—for self-definition, activism, projects of inclusion and exclusion, and so on. These may or may not all be subject to rigorous critique and questioning. But, as a scholarly practice, such testing is a basic part of anthropological knowledge generation through comparison. This means that, while we will continue to compare, we will also continue asking ourselves questions about choices between comparators and tools, the directions of comparison, and the aims and limits of any given comparison.

Importantly, such questioning keeps pulling us back to the thick middle ground of ethnographic description. Of course, this middle does not remain static or stultified. Its ability to generate knowledge grows with the introduction of new tools, a changing, often shrinking world, new purposes, and fresh objects of focus, including in and from places the anthropologist calls home.

We might then find that the long-established focus on sameness and difference tends not just towards identity or alterity, but more and more towards thinking about

comparisons that reveal resemblances, interminglings, transformations, and intensities. I hope I have shown this through my discussions of freedom and decolonisation.

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