

AGAINST COMPARATIVISM? TOWARD METHOD IN AMERICAN STUDIES IN AFRICA

Ehimika A. IJUion

Abstract

In asking the question: “what pedagogic and methodological perspective should sustain American Studies in Africa?”, the difference in levels of development of material culture between the United States and African societies, and the growing urge to globalize American studies would seem to suggest the need for comparativism as an appropriate approach. In Africa, the current state of American studies is not merely academic as evidenced by the predominant ‘lessons for Africa’ orientation. Its counterpart is the attempt to integrate elements of the American experience at the policy level. The context of comparativism is therefore the African situation; its goal is change in this situation. However, emphasis has been on comparing cultural products or artefacts, but not also structures and milieux, as conveyed by the criteria of comparability and contextuality. The consequence is the de-Americanization of the American experience by African Americanists with the accompanying loss of meaning. This is an essay against such comparativism.

Grew: To look at other cases is to see other outcomes.¹

Temperley and Bradbury: Sir Thomas More and before, America has been both Utopia and Dystopia for those in other lands.²

Ford and Haulman: ...how might we work to develop a comparative perspective for American studies?³

Etzioni and Dubow: The historical context must be taken into account in making such comparisons.⁴

Introduction

It is not illogical to view the end of the Cold War as signaling the commencement of an American-centred globalization, but only if this refers to a *formal* commencement, and relates especially to countries of the former Soviet bloc. For independent Africa, and Nigeria in particular, even though the United States wielded limited direct colonial influence, the ideological underlay of American globalism, defined in cultural and political terms, had been provided by the progressive popularization and proliferation of American studies. Although what is officially designated as American studies takes place in the departments of literature, drama, music, history, political science, economics, and international relations of Nigeria’s universities⁵, and informal, less accurate but far more influential and vibrant popular discourse on the totality of the American experience has always existed.

At both levels, the state of American studies has been merely academic, motivated by the desire to know, or be enlightened only. As evidence by the predominant ‘Lessons for Africa’ orientation, it is functional, incorporating the attempt to integrate elements of the American experience at the policy level. Since the question, ‘what lessons can be learnt from the American experience’ ultimately underpins American studies in Africa, to be truly relevant and usable as an experiential model, comparativism ought to be a conscious and systematic methodological response to

- When the American Studies Association of Nigeria (ASAN) proposed as the theme of its annual conference in 1997 American Studies in Africa in the twenty-first century, it evidently thought it was time for stocktaking. Before it could hope to chart a new course for American studies in the twenty-first century, it would have had to consider the critical question: What has been the character of American Studies in Africa? But the conference was not to be. As the scheduled late April date approached, ASAN was de-recognized by Nigeria’s military government and branded an American-sponsored subversive organization. This is a reworked version of the paper originally

written to be presented at the conference.

reflection upon the variety of social systems at different levels of complexity, and across periods. So far, it would appear, the practice of comparativism has generally been spontaneous and intuitive, limited to the mere identification of cultural or historical artefacts, alike and unlike, only at the level of observation, but not also a comparison of structures and milieux. In Africa, based on such identification, reforms have been undertaken at the policy and institutional levels, and generalizing inferences drawn at the intellectual level, both with less than the desired results. The consequence is the de-Americanization of the American experience by African Americanists with the accompanying loss of meaning, and more tellingly, failed change in the African situation. This is an essay against such comparativism.

It has been suggested that to the American Americanist the recourse to the comparative perspective is natural because of the multi-cultural complexion of American society;⁶ and also that the comparative perspective *naturally* suggests itself when American Americanists teach American studies to non-Americans abroad.⁷ The comparative perspective that emerges from the view that American studies is inherently comparative, or that comparativism is natural to any field of study, is also spontaneous and intuitive.⁸ Comparativism should be a conscious and deliberate methodological activity that could be minimally defined, as suggested in this essay, in terms of two criteria abstracted from the literature on comparative studies, characterized as *comparability* and contextuality. What has been the pattern of comparativism in relation to American Studies in Africa? What should it be?

American Studies As Historical Study

A definition that seems to capture the varied concerns that make up American studies is that it is a study of “things American”.⁹ However, to escape the connotation of “things” as elements detached, free-flowing and unintegrated, and yet retain its trans-disciplinary character, American studies shall be defined as a study of the American experience. Implicated in such a definition are the notions of time, place and peoplehood. But, in fact, American Studies is cultural studies.¹⁰ The framework for the debate about the American character from de Tocqueville to Bell¹¹ has been the peculiar physical and human environment that produced the American experience.

If the American experience is cultural, it is therefore also a culmination of developments and patterns traceable to the past, and which explains that experience. American studies is ultimately a historical study. Comparative American studies is therefore inter-cultural and inter-historical. What methodological criteria could sustain such a study?

Comparability, Contextuality and Comparativism; Toward Method

Presumably to draw attention to the non-formal character of comparison, it has been suggested that comparison is not a method.¹² This is contrary, however, to the established position in the quite extensive literature on the general methodology of comparison. Abrams, for example, believes that the comparative method has “formal requirements”, the essentials of which can be summarized as:

1. clear definition of the empirical units of study,
2. precise formulation of postulated relationships, and
3. the establishment of linguistic and cultural equivalence among the terms of comparison.¹¹

But over formalization is undesirable as the absence of any formalization. The comparative procedures are not reduced to a set of dos and don'ts. It is worth considering the criteria popularized in the history of comparative practice.

Aristotle's comparative study of constitutions is one of the earliest studies to employ the comparative method. The criterion of selection is that the cases he chose to study either have the “reputation of being well-governed”, or “have been sketched by writers and appear to be good”¹⁴ A major element in Hegel's definition of the state is the emergence of stable classes, itself the consequence of the destruction of the traditional modes of subsistence. While for the European states of the early nineteenth century this process had occurred, for the United States, however, the frontier provided outlet for the discontented, and hence the traditional civil condition remained unchanged. Under such a circumstance, Hegel concluded, “A comparison of the United States of North America with European lands is therefore impossible”.¹⁵

The same consideration informed Engels' rejection of the comparison of Russia with the United State in the late nineteenth century. He notes that.

... the U.S. are modern, bourgeois, from the very origin; that they were founded by petit bourgeois and peasants who ran away from European feudalism in order to establish a purely bourgeois society. Whereas in Russia, we have a groundwork of a primitive communistic character, a pre-civilization *Gentilgesellschaft*, crumbling ruins.¹⁶ Of course, in the first instance, comparison implies identifying similarities and differences, but not between entities that are alike, like white and white, or unlike, like black white. The first condition of the comparative method is that the entities must be comparable.

In justifying the inter-cultural study of the Vormarz Junkers and antebellum southern planters. Bowman argued their comparability by locating similarities between the antebellum plantation and Vormarz Rittergut, but dissimilarities between their historical environments.¹⁷ How comparable then could Ghana and the Soviet Union be? According to Dowse, they were both centrally controlled singleparty states, and both underdeveloped; yet, Marxism-Leninism was very different from Nkrumaism.¹⁸ Comparability as criterion of comparativism is functionally relevant. In both the policy and intellectual contexts, findings from lateral studies, i.e. studies of units that are roughly equivalent, are likely to be more valid and helpful than from vertical studies, i.e., studies of quite dissimilar entities.¹⁹

This should not be construed to mean that comparability must be at the level of polities or systems alone. Even in the category designated as vertical comparison, laterally comparable quantities or features, as in literature or art, could be discerned even though at the systemic level this is impossible. The point to note is that whatever entities, units, features or factors that are chosen for comparative study, they should be comparable.

But comparison does not end with the identification of similarities and differences, or merely placing things side by side; it must account for the similarities and differences: explain them. In doing so, it goes beyond mere epiphenomena! observation (as the emphasis on cultural artifacts as democracy and technology) deep down to the structure of society, and the history of that structure. This is the contextuality argument. Thus, while it was fashionable to refer to serfdom in czarist Russia, Bloch has argued that Russian Krepostnoi was closer to slavery than to medieval serfdom.²⁰ Also, although the English aristocracy was once fascinated by the pseudo-classical French literature, but English imitators failed to capture its essence. This plekhanov explained by reference to the inability of the English aristocrats to "transport into England those relations of society in which the French pseudo-classical literature flourished".²¹ At the intellectual level, it has been noted, every writer carries into his creation "evidences of milieu and spiritual descent". The student of comparative literature therefore "requires a broad knowledge of two literatures and two societies".²² as well as "the awareness of historical context".²¹ It is the context, whether as origins, conditions, situation, milieu or environment, which gives meaning to the realities compared.

The African Perspective on American Studies; The Social and Policy Contexts

The intellectual character of comparative American Studies in Africa has been largely conditioned by two functional considerations: the use to which the American experience has been put in Africa, and the use to which it should be put. But they do not constitute problems unique to the African policy and intellectual environment. Apart from the geo-environmental factor, American democracy, technology and superpower status have been isolated as the reasons why other peoples "draw parallels and comparisons between what was happening there and what they hoped or feared would one day happen to their own societies".²⁴ But industrialization and an infectious popular culture must be added to this list.

The image of the United States as a model has been trans-cultural. Hegel's heraldic description of America as "the land of the future", "a land of desire" for those fleeing from decay" ' is only matched by the climactic image invoked by Marx. Having described it as "the most progressive country", Marx concluded." You have only to wipe North America off the map of nations and you get anarchy, the total decay of trade and of modern civilization".²⁶ And Gifford concedes how impossible it is "to ignore

American writing which more and more sets the pace and determines the direction in our literature. English poetry today owes much of its impetus to American example.²⁷

The philanthropic justification of colonial imperialism rested on creating little London's, Brussels and Paris in Africa. The goal, as claimed, even on the eve of the 'independence revolution' was to make Africa "an extension of the family of Western nations - healthy, vigorous, and democratic."²⁸ But the existence of a post-colonial and more industrial United States was to constitute a viable counter-mode. Thus, the plea was made in the late colonial period that the United States should seek to relate with Africa on independent terms rather than through European eyes, for "Africans admire America".²⁹

At the highest political level, this much too has been said. Nnamdi Azikwe had expressed "our deep admiration of and affection for the United States, its way of life, its championship of the freedom and equality of man everywhere and, no less important its greatness."³⁰ And Jaafar Niemeiry in July 1976 identifying vastness of territory and potential resources as similarities between the Sudan and the United State, declared: "The Sudan is eager to adopt the American methods which brought about the successful utilization of American's natural resources in a short period of time".³¹

The general consequence has been the publicized effort to replicate American practices and institutions in Africa: privatization, executive presidentialism and multi-state federalism, as examples. "But the imitator is separated from his model by all that distance which exists between the society which gave him, the imitator, birth and the society in which the model lives."³² So in Africa, there are federations without the consciousness of state rights, and the Senate and House of Representatives where there is no controversy between proponents of legislative representation on the principles of population and equality. The image of the American head that constantly falls off the African body aptly describes the state of crisis of Africanized American practices and institutions.

The crisis has been attributed to an inability to bridge the distance between the societies of the model and imitator. That Japan and China have benefited from the American experience without being mongrelized, it has been argued, is because they have retained their cultural frames of reference that determined the character of acculturation. Africa does not have any!³³ Also important is the consideration that for every cultural artefact, whether material, institutional or conceptual, there is a corresponding structure of context and ideological underlay. The American experience cannot be replicated of course; but it could be reflected in the African social and policy situation only if this structure is understood.

Comparative Patterns of American Studies In Africa; A Nigerian Study

An orientation has crystallized in the way comparative American Studies is conceptualized and carried out in Nigeria. In outline, certain general features are identified as similarities and differences between Nigeria and the United States, which usually is the justification for the 'comparative' study. The particular object of study is then demonstrated to have positive values in the United States and negative values in Nigeria. The difference in value becomes the basis for abstracting what is imagined to be the critical factors or the American success and ipso facto the panacea for the Nigerian problem. This tendency shall be called the 'Lessons for Africa' (or 'Lessons for Nigeria') orientation.³⁴

Although this orientation is most illustrated by the democracy/national integration problem-cluster, it is not uncommon to find elements of, and references to it in literary studies. Thus, in a study of the subject matter of Caldwell's *Prayer Meeting* and Chuck Mile's *God Dey!* (an adaptation for the Nigerian stage of *Prayer Meeting*), it is claimed that the relevance of *Prayer Meeting* to *God Day!* "epitomised the relevance of America to Nigeria".³⁵ But this is argued to be so "not because of some vague Americanees" of Caldwell's work, "but because of the similar antecedents of history".³⁶ Of course, what was adapted was not just the fluid form of *Prayer Meeting*, but more importantly its American content.

Barnes undertook to discuss the role of Charles Houston in the civil rights movement in the United States in the half of the twentieth century, and presumably to fulfil the two-term requirement of comparison, added that "some references will be made to the legal establishment in Nigeria".³⁷ From the study, Barnes concluded that with the emergence of groups as the Constitutional. Rights Project and Civil Liberties Organization in Nigeria, "the constitutional strategy employed by Houston for equal justice for all might be referred to".³⁸

As for the problems of federalism, minorities and national integration in Nigeria, there seems to be a general agreement that veritable similarities exist between the United States and Nigeria. Arguing the view that federal character in Nigeria could allow for a fairer access to state benefits, Akinyele suggests that for this to be realized, “there is need to inject the attributes of the affirmative action into it”. The American Affirmative Action programme has become more effective, the discussion continues, because of the application of “implementation regulations”. In conclusion, “there is no reason why Nigeria should not adopt the same measure to eliminate distortions in the implementation of the federal character”.³⁹ In addition, just like in the United States, Nigerian minority groups should not rely on government intervention, but should ‘form national associations for self help and protection’.⁴⁰

For Mogeckwu, Nigeria can benefit from America’s Affirmative Action “by asking groups from so-called disadvantaged areas to also attempt to pull themselves up by their bootstraps”,⁴¹ and in addition, Nigeria should adopt the American concept of citizenship based on residency to “encourage social, economic and political mobility and do away with the federal character problems”.⁴² Alao, also expressing optimism in the relevance of the American experience in “group conflict resolution and ethnic accommodation to Nigeria” draws by implication a unique lesson for Nigeria.

The advanced capitalist economy has succeeded in shifting competition for the control of national wealth and power from among ethnic groups to organized business groups, companies and conglomerates on the one hand and a class of those who sell labour to capital on the other hand.⁴³

But there was an earlier and more critical methodological tradition. As early as 1944, Nwafor Orizu and expressed the view that Nigeria’s political future had “a great deal to draw from the United States”. However, he added, “we have to be careful to distinguish between apparent and real similarities in circumstances”.⁴⁴ And Olaniyan could not think of any other approach to teaching and research in American Studies in African universities than the comparative. However, the better understanding of American domestic and foreign policies to be gained thereby would be “in the light of the history and culture of the United States”.⁴⁵

Ade Ajayi’s inaugural address at the first annual conference of the American Studies Association of Nigeria in February 1991, an apparent response to the suggestive theme: “Citizenship, Migration, Mobility, and the American Dream: What Lessons for Nigeria”, had defined a comparative approach to American Studies as “using insights from American Studies to throw light upon our problems and the search for policy options”.⁴⁶ But he had cautioned that “lessons are not going to come from superficial observations and impressions”,⁴⁷ while emphasis should also be on “why the American model may not always be suitable”.⁴⁸ This had informed the use of the label “simplistic solution” to describe such lessons and their conversion to policy.⁴⁹ Also emphasizing the importance of the deeper structure and context to comparative American Studies, Mattox concludes: “If the United States’ historical experience in that regard suggests lessons for those countries, it may be primarily, I think, in general concepts and ideas and less in specific programmes for action”.⁵⁰

It must be conceded that policy prescriptions or lessons could be the outcome of comparative studies, but certainly not just at the level of shared problems, the structure of such comparison is usually too simple: the United States had achieved *x* by doing *y*; Nigeria, being like the United States, desires, *x*: therefore, Nigeria should do *y*. That the United States being multi-ethnic and federal is relevant to Nigeria’s problems of national integration must be predicated not on the epiphenomenal observation of similarities, but on the past, current or futures similarity or comparability of contexts. The non-territorial character of American ethnicity and pre-American existence of the basic federating units indicate, lot example, that no simple parallel can be drawn between the United States and Nigeria regarding these issues. Nevertheless, comparative policy analysis, which the ‘Lessons for Africa’ orientation is in reverse, like other truly comparative studies, is a much more serious undertaking. The adequacy of the results of comparative policy analysis done in Africa or elsewhere for Africans in borne out by the high rate of policy failure in Africa.

Conclusion

The goal of comparative studies is certainly not to draw lessons or craft policies for the other 'lesser' units of study (organizations, societies or states). Once the historicity of any formation is conceded, the possibility of imitating it, or presenting, as a model becomes problematic. Yet, there is no compelling methodological consideration for adopting a comparative approach toward teaching or research in American Studies. This is not to understate the intellectual worth of comparative studies. What needs to be emphasized is that there are some minimum formal requirements to be satisfied. Critical requirements, for this essay, are that the units selected for comparison must be comparable, and the similarities or differences abstracted must be accounted for.

Endnotes

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