

Lincoln, Bruce. 2018. *Apples and Oranges: Explorations In, On, and With Comparison*. London, Chicago: University of Chicago Press. xii + 335 pp. ISBN 978-0-226-56407-4 (paper)

I cannot help but admire Bruce Lincoln as a model scholar. His writing is crisp and clear, his mind is sharp, his work is creative, erudite, versatile and competently up-to-date in a range of fields of scholarly inquiry, toying with a remarkable number of research languages. Lincoln has an enormous discipline in reading and writing and one wonders how he manages to handle all these diverse literatures without a dozen research assistants. Over 100 pages of notes bear witness to his ardent attempt to do ‘real’ scholarship—wasn’t it Lincoln who once suggested that the footnote is what makes a text into an academic one? His regular outpouring of books—mainly collections of essays—every five years or so has become something like a cyclical pattern; it is always a pleasure to add another volume to the pile. Most of his readers will probably read the introductions and some selected chapters of these volumes that tend to be more or less loosely grouped around a main theme (here: comparison). On occasion Lincoln lets his readers partake in his own intellectual development. For example, in the Introduction to *Apple and Oranges* he narrates entertainingly about his early interest in Frazer and his experiences as a student in Chicago with Smith and with Eliade, whom he calls “my friend, *Doktorvater*, and mentor” (132). Many readers will enjoy the recollections that seem to lift our author on the shoulder of giants—as a trickster figure in the history of scholarship. Some chapters revise some of Lincoln’s earlier interpretations of specific cases, thereby illustrating a mature degree of self-criticism. As in earlier volumes, this one engages in auto-canonization: a programmatic piece that was first written several decades ago (in 1984, with Cristiano Grottanelli) is here republished once again—having already been republished in 1998—thereby conveying the message that it has withstood the test of time and has become proven wisdom: Lincoln knew it all long ago. And we have all apprehended his lesson and keep on transmitting it to our students: “To study religions with due attention to context and process ... to focus on the world in which religions operate (i.e., the world of society and history), as well as the world they describe; to focus on what religions do, as well as what they claim to be.” (24) Who would not agree with this? Somewhat dusty, however, in our post-Marxist neo-liberal age is the claim to understand religion as a mode or style of “ideology”, or even ideology’s “most extreme form” (23)—where it remains somewhat unclear to me whether religion represents one side on a continuous spectre of ideologies, or whether there is a clear-cut binary distinction between religious and “non-religious ideologies” (23).

Apples and Oranges has three sections. It starts with “General Observations”. Lincoln’s overall message is quite simple. In contrast to a “grand” or “strong comparison”, the past and present failures of which he criticizes in stark terms—he accuses strong comparativists of “grievous abuses”, intellectual appropriation, “exploitation” (9), etc.—he advocates a “comparativism of weaker and more modest sorts that (a) focus on a relatively small number of comparanda that the researcher can study closely; (b) are equally attentive to relations of similarity and of difference; (c) grant equal dignity and intelligence to all parties concerned; and (d) are attentive to the social, historical, and political contexts and subtexts of religious and literary texts.” (27) In his prose throughout the book, I sense a certain political self-satisfaction that Lincoln positions himself with the modest, the weak and the oppressed in fighting against greedy elites and their strategies of persuasion aimed at achieving (more) power.

The second section dismisses two examples of grand/strong comparison, Carlo Ginzburg’s *Storia Notturna* (*The Night Battles*) from 1989 and Michael Witzel’s *The Origins of the*

World's Mythologies from 2012. One cannot fail to note that Lincoln's colleague Wendy Doniger has written enthusiastic blurbs to endorse both these works. It should also be kept in mind that none of the two authors is a scholar of religion/s in a strict sense, one being a historian and one an Indologist. In the case of Witzel Lincoln's line of attack is genealogical: since Witzel draws some of his evidence and observations on publications by racist Nazi scholars, mainly Hermann Baumann Witzel's whole attempt is deemed tainted right from the start. In fact, Lincoln's chapter spends more time on the discussion of Baumann and other earlier scholars (58–68) than on Witzel's own contribution, which he dismisses as unoriginal. Lincoln ends his diatribe by reflections on the meaning of history, including the importance of the history of scholarship, which is always contaminated by extra-scholarly contexts (69f). While Lincoln has nothing to say on Witzel's biography, his attack on Ginzburg ends with some remarks on the Italian scholar's family history leading Lincoln to some conjectures on the 'real' subject of the 'night battles' fought by the historian's imagination (52f). (One wonders whether Ginzburg's blurb on the cover can be read as an endorsement of Lincoln's reading of his work.) As in his critique of Witzel, Lincoln reprimands Ginzburg for relying on the work of the Nazi scholar Otto Höfler. Lincoln's analyses serve as a powerful reminder that "context" includes the context of scholarly discovery. As much as I appreciate his call to situate the study the history of scholarship as part of "political, social, and cultural history" (70), I also suspect that Lincoln's critique operates on the basis of a logic of pollution: taking serious the scholarly work of Nazi scholars, or making use of source materials compiled by them, amounts to a cancerous contamination. Remarkably, in his discussion of what he considers grandiose failures Lincoln pulls out some elements of a grand or strong theory of his own that afford him a different reading of a key source than the one proposed by Ginzburg. Here is an example: "The latter group, like subalterns everywhere, ..." (48) In other words, some groups have universal patterns of behaviour. His "sociocultural explanation" proceeds on the assumption that "similar socioeconomic, political, and discursive dynamics" predict similar "adaptive responses" or "religious outcomes". (49) This may well be so, but this strategy fails to explain the religious forms of expression ('morphology') that such responses take—why would they be similar (if they are similar)? Lincoln's "materialist revision of the shamanic scenario" claims that "the recovery of stolen wealth" was the main goal of the Livonian werewolves and that they cannot be classified as shamans (a problematic category anyway) because the latter are mainly concerned with rescuing the souls of their patients (52). While there is no doubt that the recovery of goods was indeed a main goal, I am surprised that Lincoln denies the rescuing of souls as he himself cites evidence for this (45, 202).¹ In other words, even in weak comparison grand theory can mute evidence.

Having shown the futility (or even danger) of "strong" comparisons, showtime starts. Lincoln sets out to demonstrate how to get it right. While Witzel focuses on whole systems of myths (which he considers to be his novel approach), Lincoln deals with (elements of) single myths. Part three of *Apples and Oranges* assembles three articles that centre on Scythian matters, a classical locus of comparative experimentation. Let us take a look at the structure of the first of these chapters as an example of the workings of weak comparison. The chapter starts off with a discussion of some classical scholarship arriving at a conclusion that is hardly controversial, namely that Herodotus' view of the Scythians is neither a transparent window "nor a mirror reflecting an inverted self", that "it provides neither a fully reliable picture nor one that is utterly useless" (74). In a rhetorical manoeuvre the second section of this chapter

¹ The court protocol cited in endnote 51 on page 202 reads: "Sonn und mondt gehe übers meer, hole di seele wieder, die der teuffel in die hölle gebracht und gib dem vieh das leben und die gesundheit wieder, so ihm entnommen."

acknowledges the limits of his own competence (75), a gesture that allows him to throw a series of diverse sources that he happens to be familiar with into the comparative mix to illuminate some shared themes (e.g., the legitimacy of kinship), that involve “much the same set of ideas” (80). At the end of these ruminations, the final section of the chapter switches to a meta-level by putting forward some claims that feel like grand theory to me, namely that all of these observations are “one more example—if one more were needed—of the contradictions that is the essence of ideology: that between theory and practice, lofty ideals and grubby dealings” (83). Indeed, one wonders, did we really need one more example of such a fairly general (and at least in Marxist circles widely shared) theoretical point? The final paragraph invokes a similar universalist claim of a popular social psychology variety, namely that people tend to “identify contradictions *in the other*, then exaggerate their frequency and severity”—here I could not help but think of Lincoln’s dealings with Ginzburg and Witzel—“so that the contradictions of one’s own people appear relative minor in (explicit or implicit) contrast” (83). Similarly, the following chapter, which begins with some brief comments on “critical scholarship on myths” (84), ends by invoking a universalist theory: “Here, as is so often true elsewhere, differences among the variations [of a myth] represent the instruments through which rival narrators and populations jockeyed for position, each one attempting to turn the story into a brief for superiority of these groups they represent” (94). The third and final chapter in this part is an attack on Karl Meuli (1891–1968) framed by juxtaposing four of the “most dangerous traits” of comparative research (96) and the advantages of weak comparison that stays within the limits of one’s competence (109). One of the claimed advantages is that “it lets one frame plausible hypotheses, instead of grandiose theories” (109). As we have seen, however, Lincoln himself is not immune to the allure of grand theorizing.

Lincoln’s ‘limits of competence’ are far broader than most scholars I know of—so that the seemingly modest gesture of staying within the limits of one’s expertise turns into an effective boast of his broad competences. The final five chapters nicely serve to illustrate Lincoln’s skill and virtuosity in selecting and dealing with cases (all based on textual sources), and these are often schematized by helpful diagrams. The cases juxtapose or compare Old English and Middle Persian texts (chapter 9), Old Norse texts and records from colonial Nigeria (chapter 10), speeches from the Spanish Civil War and a range of sources relating to the Lakota Ghost Dance (chapter 11), Herodotus and Acoma Pueblo myths (chapter 12), and different versions of Pueblo myths reported by different narrators in different contexts (chapter 13). Several of these exercises in weak comparison are constructed in such a manner that issues of common ancestry or origins cannot arise in the first place. Instead Lincoln takes certain surface similarities as a starting point, provides detailed analyses of the single cases and then weaves them together to illustrate some kind of shared or overarching theme. In some cases, this allows him to illustrate general points such as Karl Mannheim’s typological distinction between ideology and utopia (121 [chapter 9]), to introduce distinctions between different versions of apocalyptic time (where he introduces the notion of recursive apocalypticisms [chapter 11]), or to challenge the idea that myths invariably “serve to naturalize, sacralise, and/or legitimate the institutions whose origin they narrate,” to show that there are myths that do the reverse because “they stress the artificiality of the institutions they treat” (163 [chapter 12]), and to point to different projects of persuasion (chapter 13). In some chapters he refers to general issues or problems that transcend the selected cases, such as tensions in social structure (128) or the (non)sustainability of egalitarian relations and its replacement by hierarchy (147, 183). Lincoln’s observation that in the myths he has selected and analysed under this perspective hierarchical relations are “understood to be artificial, dishonest, and discriminatory” (183) is informed by a specific political and theoretical positionality.

I could not resist reading some of Lincoln's remarks as suggesting that advocates of what he calls strong comparison are driven by sinister motives, among them the exploitation and appropriation of precious goods to yield "profit" on the academic market, as a "*transient spike in their reputation*" (9 [italics in the original]). This book, published by a prestigious publisher and written by a distinguished scholar from a highly reputed ivory-tower institution with a vast international network, shows that even weak comparison can help make or maintain one's reputation, especially when it self-confidently boasts of its own relevance and virtuosity in the name of noble epistemological virtues such as attention to detail, depth, nuance, rigor and systematicity (e.g., 12) as well as ethical virtues such as modesty and granting dignity and intelligence to historical actors (e.g., 27). Lincoln stops short of explicit manoeuvres of reflexivity, as he does not provide reflections on processes of case selection and analysis, nor on his guiding interests and theoretical assumptions, which makes the book seem something of a conceptual palimpsest. At one point in his discussion, Lincoln notes that "stark binary oppositions are always hierarchic and prejudicial" (58). It seems to me that his opposition between strong and weak comparison falls prey to exactly this. While it provides a catchy slogan that may be appropriated by indiscriminating consumers, the rich multi-disciplinary literature on comparison provides a series of more nuanced distinctions. Even limiting ourselves to the study of religion's—recall Jan Platvoet's *Comparing Religions: A Limitative Approach* (1982)—his methodological concerns are not as new and original as Lincoln seems to suggest. Let's hope, however, that *Apples and Oranges*, as it comes from a scholar who is by many considered an authority, will help combat current naïve and uninformed prejudices against comparison and that eventually in *Numen* and other journals more comparative articles make their appearance.

Michael Stausberg
University of Bergen
Michael.Stausberg@uib.no