

compared to what?

by claude s. fischer

One thing I know is that contexts (lower-case) matter.

I'm a pest on this topic: my kids grind their teeth when, having declared this thing is cool or that thing sucks, I casually ask, "Compared to what?" Still, it is important. Too many of our conversations have very constricted contexts. People declare that consumerism is rampant, crime is high, family ties are tense, politics are vicious, men are juvenile, and so on. But each bold assertion begs: Compared to who? Compared to when? Compared to where? Compared to what?

American public discussion is often misleading because the discussants fail to place their observations in cross-national or historical contexts. No one group is more at fault than another—this is an annoying habit of both the right and the left (and, for that matter, of the apolitical). So, when someone claims that the U.S. has the best health care system in the world, a careful listener must assume the speaker has never really compared health outcomes in the U.S. to those elsewhere. (Or perhaps the speaker had dropped a qualifier: the U.S. has the best health care system for wealthy people.) And when a student in class comments matter-of-factly that America is the "most racist society in the world," one is left doubting that he or she actually knows anything about the harsh realities of the wider world.

The lack of *historical* context is especially striking. Many journalists, for example, describe American society as polarized and conflict-ridden, and, if our political and social tensions are held up to those of the 1950s, that description seems apt. But if one compares the 2000s to the 1960s, the 1930s, the late 19th century, or the 1860s, today's battles seem like snowball fights. Consider the struggles over immigration: our arguments can be tense and unpleasant, but we have not experienced the viciousness of the 19th century anti-Catholic and anti-Asian struggles, which included bloody street riots and lynchings.

So it is that popular impressions of American life rest on unacknowledged historical comparisons. When people lament our "rootless society," "violent society," or "god-less society," they're implying that American society is *more* so in each of these ways than it was "once upon a time." That conclusion depends, of course, on specifically *which* "once upon a time" we want to use for comparison. These particular claims are for the most part wrong: Americans today are probably *more* rooted than, *less* violent than, and at least as religious as Americans in almost any other historical era.

These mistakes of contexts arise for a variety of reasons. We don't know much about the rest of the world, we don't know

much history or have a nostalgic view of it, or we are trying to make a polemical statement. Heated political debates are a particularly good breeding ground for implicit (and inaccurate) historical references, as we see when anti-immigrant speakers claim that "immigrants today" don't learn English. Actually, today's immigrants learn English faster than immigrants of past generations. Similarly, environmentalists typically imply that our continent was pristine before the arrival of white settlers. Actually, in some places the native peoples had already substantially disrupted and depleted the land.

Asking "Compared to what?" is critical for understanding the issues at hand and having honest debates about hot topics like crime, social welfare, and education. It is foolish—though common—to debate as if the rest of the world did not exist, arguing our way to policies on the basis of theories or principles rather than drawing on accumulated experience. And it is foolish—though common—to misrepresent history, claiming political positions based on mythology.

Correctly answering the contextual question requires that we (and I definitely include sociologists) do a better job of understanding American history and how the American experience compares to those of cultures around the world. Obviously, better education, teaching students about the diversity of societies and the realities of the past, would help. So would more willingness by writers (journalists and sociologists alike) to explore the cross-cultural comparisons and lived history behind the contentious issues of our time.

In closing, a caveat: another answer to my question, "Compared to what?," is Robert F. Kennedy's answer when he famously told us, "There are those who look at things the way they are and ask why... I dream of things that never were and ask why not?"—that is, to use our ideals as our comparisons. And yet, doing so wisely still requires that we really know the difference between things that were and things that never were, that we root even hopes in a full understanding of realities.

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