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The term ‘classic’, when employed in the broad sense, usually designates a prominent example, a product of mastery, in other words something which can serve as role model for its perfection, beauty and authority.

Looking at the recent anthology edited by Tom Ginsburg, Pier Giuseppe Monateri and Francesco Parisi, the first impression is surely this one.

In a huge work of recollection (4 volumes, 2800 pages in all), we assist at the reunion of the most influent milestones in the study of comparative law, with a time span ranging from 1903 to our days. This avant-garde anthology contains indeed more than 70 articles written by the most prominent legal scholars around the globe, all categorized in branches logically connected together and with the remarkable merit of putting in communication the old masters of law with most recent ones.

The contents included in the four volumes vary from private and public law, to legal institutions and methodological approaches, providing in a single view the most eminent articles ever written. Obviously, even if completeness could not have been the realistic scope, the survey gives still an insightful spectrum of the modern era of comparative legal studies.

Volume I, for example, begins emphatically with the 1903 article by Pollock entitled “The History of Comparative Jurisprudence” (even if the First International Conference was held only 2 years before in Paris), followed by critical discussions about major themes like “legal transplants” (Watson; Legrand), “legal hybrids” (MacDonald; Yiannopoulos) and cultural evolution of legal rules (Hobbel; Posner; Parisi; Geertz). Volume II faces directly the basic notion of “legal families” (Stein), showing how comparative law can clarify our misunderstandings about legal families (Lawson; Monateri; Ruskola). Then, it approaches the main, classical distinction between ‘civil law’ and ‘common law’, showing the great role of precedent in both legal traditions (Cappelletti; Goodhart), ending naturally with an in-depth analysis of the role of Courts

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in political context (Ramseyer; Sweet; Shapiro). Volume III, taking into exam the substantive differences in private law, hosts essays principally about property law (Rose; Banner; Demsetz; Gordley and Heller), contract law (Atiyah; Von Mehren; Lorenzen; Farnsworth), and tort law (Parisi), with a significant variety of approach from the ‘law and economics’ field (Levmore) to the historical one (White; Watson). Finally, Volume IV consists of a selection of public law both from a theoretical (Elster; Horowitz; Garbaum) and nation-specific point of view (Kommers; Theodore de Bary), with essays about ‘judicial review’ (Kelsen) and civil/criminal procedure (Metzger; Chase; Damaška; Langer).

Anyway, apart from this short and necessarily incomplete sketch, a substantial question might arise: How can comparative law help us to answer the compelling issues posed by contemporary politics?

First, giving reason of the multifaceted interests which animate from the inside this subject, the Authors underline the particular breath of comparative law, which encourages by nature to pose particular attention to ‘macro-level’ legal issues. In this way, to assume a transnational perspective becomes both essential and fruitful in order to catch the global evolution of legal systems and domestic traditions. It must be note, yet, that over time comparative law has not been only a descriptive device, able simply to provide plain descriptions (or predictions) about how the law acts. Historically, comparative law has served as the most powerful tool to create juridical and political identities. This ‘purposive’ character—as brilliantly noted—constitutes then the real beginning of comparative law as discipline, a sort of political strategy finalized to define the cultural shape of a nation. Also from this enriching methodological perspective, the selected essays show their deep importance, reminding the dutiful use of a particular kind of deconstructionism oriented to dispel legal myths and fictions.

Another pleasant factor, as it could be said using a pun, is that making ‘comparison’ inside ‘comparativism’ the essays selected by the Editors outline a subtle genealogy about the whole subject. As explained in the Introduction, the approach followed during the recollection was precisely to look back at the existing literature in order to “identify a canon”. This literary notion is of extremely importance to understand the limits and the passages of the discipline. The exciting aspect of comparative legal studies is precisely the never-ending challenge of their own boundaries, that is, the everlasting effort of including, rather than excluding, new perspectives. In this way, academic bounds become not a limit, but the premises for a newer form of enquiry.

Thinking in pictures, indeed, we could consider comparative law as a ‘prism’ with many multi-faceted layers, each of them representing a particular perspective that sheds new light upon the entire figure. Anthropology, philosophy, sociology, political science and obviously jurisprudence are all essential components of this major task and none of them should be lost.

Observing in a critic manner our discipline, we could also say that every form of comparison is, actually, a sort of creation. Legal identities, in this way, show their fictitious and purposive grounds. The task of comparative law, then, is precisely to regain consciousness about this fact, undertaking a sort of ‘alethic’ operation—as Prof. Pier Giuseppe Monateri argues—finalized to dismantle the ideological veil shared by the most conventional views.

Despite all this, a huge and nihilistic objection has been moved against comparative law, that is, the radical impossibility of communication between legal frameworks. Proudly, the present anthology testifies rather the opposite. Proclaiming the death of comparative studies—a position frequently taken by British legal scholars—is nothing but a shortsighted standpoint, which shows immediately its inadequacy. Products of mind and of creativity, as comparative legal studies are, can never die.

As the Editors reveal at the end of their preface, this recollection of essays aims to constitute a “path through the wilderness of comparative law”, a sort of new beginning oriented to unleash the “boundless potential” of an approach not yet expired. Just observing the versatile manifestations of law which nowadays inhabit our societies, we can surely argue that there’s still a long, fascinating way to go.