American War. In case study research programs, scholars at times have to live with some sense of indeterminacy when competing mechanisms push in the same direction.

Conclusions

We use the democratic peace research program as a methodological example not because its historical evolution is typical but because it illustrates particularly well the strengths and limits of both methods. Our argument does not imply that case study methods will supplant statistical studies in this program, or that the historical evolution of social science research programs is usually from quantitative to qualitative methods. Usually research using both methods proceeds simultaneously and iteratively, as each method confronts new research tasks at which the other method is superior. Indeed, as case study researchers devise more differentiated measures of "democracy," their findings will no longer enjoy the empirical support of statistical methods using the definitions employed in existing databases. New statistical studies will need new databases using the refined definitions. Formal modeling can also help identify possible counterintuitive dynamics on the democratic peace that can be submitted to empirical testing by statistical and/or case study methods.

The evolution of this research program does not suggest that case study methods are somehow "better" than statistical methods, any more than the reverse. Rather, the two methods' contributions are complementary but not identical. They provide epistemologically different types of knowledge. Statistical methods have more effectively addressed the question of whether a democratic or interdemocratic peace exists — corresponding to the notion of causal effects. Case study methods have been more effective at testing the proposed reasons for why such a peace might exist — corresponding to the notion of causal mechanisms. Adequate causal explanations must include assertions on causal effects and on the underlying causal mechanisms that bring about these observed effects. Theological arguments that causal effects are "logically prior" to causal mechanisms (KKV, 1994: 76-82), or that causal mechanisms are "ontologically prior" to causal effects (Yee, 1996: 69-85), miss the point. Neither of these components of explanatory theory, and neither of the methods best-suited to capturing them, should be privileged over the other.

References

David Collier and Steven Levitsky, "Democracy With Adjectives: Conceptual Innovation in Comparative Research," World Politics Vol. 49, no. 3 (April, 1997).


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Problems of Equivalence in Comparative Politics: Apples and Oranges, Again

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Introduction

The past several years have witnessed lively debates in comparative methodology focusing on important issues such as case selection and the relative strengths of qualitative versus quantitative research strategies. This research note takes up an issue that recent methodological debates have largely skirted or ignored, namely the question of issue or process equivalence in cross-national comparative research. How to compare "like with like" is a very old problem in comparative research. In their classic The Logic of Comparative Social Inquiry, Adam Przeworski and Henry Teune discuss at length the problem of establishing equivalent cross-national indicators and measures. We believe that their admonitions have been largely unheeded in a good deal of comparative research, which has been insufficiently concerned with this problem and altogether too quick to assign equivalence to processes whose meaning may well vary when situated within different contexts.

Our argument is two-fold. First, we suggest that comparative research needs to attend more closely to the question of whether "matched comparisons" that track the same phenomenon or process in different contexts are in fact comparing apples with apples. Second, we argue that in order to answer certain types of questions, a different research strategy may be required, one which compares "apples with oranges", that is, looks at different processes in different countries, in order to capture analytically equivalent issues. In short, a more
of a given system.

We wholeheartedly agree with Przeworski and Teune but believe that as common-sensical as this advice may sound, most comparative research has largely ignored it. For example, quantitative studies and survey research routinely use standardized indicators of complex social processes without considering whether or not they are really tapping the same process in different contexts. As Rueschemeyer and Stephens point out, “cross-national statistical research settles on one standardized operationalization and takes inadequacies of fit, which vary across cases, into the bargain.” They suggest that “qualitative comparative historical research can give much closer attention to the match between evidence and theoretical conceptualization.” Unfortunately, this potential is not always exploited, and much contemporary qualitative work is equally quick to rely on “matched comparisons” that track a given phenomenon in different countries without considering how the same process or phenomenon can have contrasting meanings in different contexts.

To illustrate, let us take an example from the literature on contemporary labor politics in the advanced industrial democracies. The dominant approach in this literature has been to fix on a single issue or process (e.g., wage bargaining or work reorganization) and to compare developments in the selected area across a range of countries. Thus, we have important quantitative studies of trends in wage bargaining across a large number of countries, as well as more qualitative studies that compare work reorganization in different national contexts. Such “matched comparisons” have taught us a great deal about the relative success and failure of unions in different countries to cope with particular changes. Yet because we do not know whether these issues have the same meaning or importance in each of the countries being compared, we have no idea whether or not the various unions were, in fact, fighting the same battle. In short, what many of these studies by and large do not consider—and indeed, what the research design itself obscures—is that the very same issue may have a very different meaning or valence in different countries and hence, quite logically, provoke very different outcomes.

Take, for example, the issue of work reorganization. A large literature tells us that one of the most serious challenges facing unions in the advanced industrial countries is employer efforts to reorganize work along more “flexible” lines. Indeed, matched comparisons reveal broad differences in the ability or success of unions in different countries to cope with this common trend. In countries such as Sweden and Germany, studies show that unions have been active participants in workplace restructuring, whereas in the United Kingdom and the United States, the reorganization of work has often undermined union strength and thus prevented unions from influencing the content and direction of change on the shop floor.

This is all very interesting and true. But before we draw any broad lessons from these divergent experiences, we need to consider explicitly the contrasting meaning or valence of work reorganization in these different countries. In fact, the significance of shopfloor reorganization varies tremendously from country to country. Unions in the United States have strongly resisted more flexible forms of work organization, because this kind of change undermines narrow job definitions with their related wage, seniority, and security provisions—practices that represent the institutional anchors for American unions’ traditional rights within the firm. In Germany, by contrast, where employment security and union strength are not dependent on shop-floor practices such as job control, works councils and their unions have welcomed similar changes that upgrade their skills and enhance their autonomy. This example illustrates how the very same issue or process can have distinct meanings in different national settings, depending on contrasts in institutional starting points and in the impact of various changes on traditional arrangements.
This is the case, the conventional practice of comparing apparently similar changes across countries and attributing varying degrees of labor "success" to different national institutional arrangements is somewhat misleading. These comparisons are misleading because they give the impression that they are comparing "apples with apples" when instead, given differences in starting points and varying degrees of valence different issues possess in different national contexts, they are often in practice comparing substantially different phenomena. By failing to confront the issue of equivalence, matched comparisons of this sort frequently blend out important differences in starting points that may in fact hold the key to explaining the observed divergent outcomes.

Contextualized Comparison

Rather than assume (or arbitrarily assign) equivalence to the same process cross-nationally, we need to ask specifically if we are in fact comparing like with like. And indeed, in order to answer certain kinds of questions, an entirely different approach to comparative analysis may be required. What we have called "contextualized comparison" is a strategy which self-consciously seeks to address the issue of equivalence by searching for analytically equivalent phenomena - even if expressed in substantively different terms - across different contexts. Analysts interested in the relative success of different union movements in dealing with common pressures for decentralization and flexibility need to be aware that these common international trends have been refracted into very different conflicts, centering on divergent substantive issues in alternative national contexts. National institutional arrangements create different sets of rigidities and flexibilities in different countries, so that conflicts between labor and management have come to center on different "sticking points." Thus, if we want to know about how well unions are succeeding cross-nationally, it may be more appropriate to compare across these "sticking points" rather than to track a single issue, like work organization, cross-nationally.

To illustrate the point, let us return briefly to the previous example. Work reorganization has been a much more conflictual "sticking point" between labor and employers in the United States than in many other countries. Work rules and job classifications gave organized labor in the U.S. a set of rights and an established role (monitoring these rules) within the firm. As a result, work reorganization aimed at eliminating these rules and classifications threatens to alter if not eliminate established union rights and hence union presence on the shop floor. This is why these issues have so much more valence and have provoked so much more conflict in the United States than other, analogous changes in other American industrial relations practices (e.g., hiring and firing practices, flexible compensation schemes, contingent employment arrangements) and also why this same issue is less contested elsewhere. In Germany, for instance, work reorganization is not tied up with a similar reordering of core union rights; in fact (in stark contrast to the United States) German unions had reasons of their own for embracing and actively promoting work reorganization.

At the same time, however, other issues have indeed been important sticking points between unions and employers in other countries. Wage flexibility, for example, was a hotly contested issue in Sweden in the 1980s because of traditional bargaining structures and union policies that were both premised on and sustained a much higher degree of wage compression than in the United States. In Germany, the relative ease with which work reorganization has been negotiated contrasts sharply with the major struggles between German unions and employer associations over shorter and more flexible work hours.

In short, putatively common international trends have in fact set in motion rather different conflicts in different national contexts. Conventional studies often draw broad conclusions concerning relative union success or failure from an analysis of a single issue area in different countries. But the choice of which issue area to study can affect the results considerably. As we have seen, German unions have been more successful in negotiating changes in work reorganization, but then again, work reorganization does not pose the same kinds of problems for German unions that it does for American unions. The relative ease with which work reorganization in Sweden has been negotiated contrasts sharply with the considerable conflict over other issue areas, such as wage flexibility, have sparked in that country. As a result, focusing on work reorganization alone tells us little about how well Swedish or German unions do when employers' goals clash more directly with the traditional institutional foundations of union power. The strategy of contextualized comparison confronts this issue by explicitly considering cross-national variation in conflicts centering on (different, nationally specific) sticking points.

The strategy of contextualized comparison is not limited to labor scholarship but has broader implications for other specializations in comparative politics. Consider, for example, the debates surrounding the economic and political reconfiguration of Eastern Europe. Some of this work has sought to assess the relative "success" or "failure" of the transformation process in different East European countries by analyzing how far along they have come or well they are doing, for instance, in promoting privatization or in achieving macroeconomic stabilization. Differences along a supposedly common trajectory are often seen to indicate varying degrees of political will or commitment to democratic capitalism. But this assumes that these countries embarked on these various processes from the same point of departure, and this is clearly not the case. Other work - intuitively if generally not explicitly guided by some of the points we are stressing here - recognizes that "privatization" or "macroeconomic stabilization" not only involve different kinds of policy initiatives, but also have very
pointed out, in Germany, the problems posed by globalization present themselves—first and foremost—in labor market institutions, whereas in Japan, it is the financial system that has emerged as the “weak link” in the system. For anyone interested what globalization means for the advanced industrial democracies, this is already an important insight, one that our research should acknowledge and build upon rather than obscure.

In sum, contextualizing comparative analysis means not simply being more careful about our choice of categories or phenomena to compare, or about the importance of issue or process equivalence; but may also push us at times to make different kinds of comparisons altogether. What, at first, might look like “apples and oranges,” may turn out to be, under closer examination, a more effective way of capturing the particular way common challenges have been translated into specific conflicts in the various national settings. This more nuanced and context-sensitive approach to issues of equivalence, we believe, is among the greatest contributions that qualitative comparative analyses can make to our field.

Debates on the scientific status of rival methodologies have profound implications for the kind of social status, financial and institutional support customarily bestowed upon them. Disputes over the scientific status of case studies have unfortunately taken for granted the idea that the philosophical and methodological presumptions that are commonly taken to underlie statistical analyses of data also provide the proper foundation for the evaluation of case studies. Even defenders of case studies typically couch their defense in terms of the language of covering laws, falsification, degrees of freedom and the like.

It is well to consider whether such a point of view is really warranted. The pastiche of positivist and Popperian positions and classical statistical theory commonly invoked as the basis for evaluating case studies is itself problematic. I have addressed these problems elsewhere; here I wish to present a different way of thinking about case studies—one that seems to accord much more closely with practitioners’ self-understandings, as well as providing more helpful and less distorting guidance for the conduct of research than the statistical metaphor does. To claim that inferences are drawn and tested is not to claim that they are tested using a process that mimics classical statistics or relies only on


3 For example, Oliver Blanchard, Kenneth A. Froot, and Jeffrey D. Sachs, The Transition in Eastern Europe (University of Chicago Press, 1994).

4 For more on how seemingly similar processes play themselves out quite differently in different east European countries, see Anna Seleny, “Old Political Rationalities and New Democracies: Compromise and Confrontation in Hungary and Poland,” unpublished manuscript, Department of Politics, Princeton University, July 1997; and David Stark, “Heterarchy: Asset Ambiguity, Organizational Innovation, and the Postsocialist Firm,” unpublished manuscript, Department of Sociology, Columbia University, November 1997.

Why Is A Single Case Important?

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