

Potentials and Limitations of Comparative Method in Social Science

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Abstract

Comparison is a common research method with outstanding merits and with widespread application. The aim of this article is to discuss systematically some of the methodological strategies of using this mode of research in social science. To do so a few typologies regarding the functions and leverages of comparative analysis are presented first. In the next step various ways in which comparative research is applied in social theory are exemplified, with especial attention paid to comparative studies of large-scale, macro-level historical process of social change. This article ends with a discussion of the limitations of comparison as a method of generating historical generalisations.

Keywords: Comparison, Development, Euro-centrism, Historical generalisations, Modernisation

Introduction

Comparative analysis is an old mode of research, widely used within many, if not all, fields of scientific inquiry. As a method strategy, comparison plays an important part in the most diverse branches of the humanities and the social sciences alike; and while its early uses can be traced back to the Antiquity, it seems to be more fashionable and evolving than ever, as results from contemporary comparative research can be found in nearly all disciplines and applied to the study of almost any topic, ranging from comparative study of the working conditions across nations, to the analysis of the differences of life values within a single societal context, to the examination of the contrasts of face-work in various cultures, to the study of the varieties of written documents in different countries (Allik, *et. al.* 2010; Drobni, *et. al.* 2010; Droogers 2005; [Magun & Rudnev 2010](#); [Merkin & Ramadan 2010](#); Suzuki 2010). Yet, despite this broad and inter-disciplinary use, there is typically not much attention paid to this method as such and it is only occasionally, if ever, that the merits and demerits of this strategy receive any considerable and meaningful treatment in social scientific method textbooks. In consequence, more often than not this method is used without due care and its results are received rather uncritically. Given the importance and spread of comparison as a research method and given the lack of sufficient attention paid to various methodological issues that evolve around comparison, this paper sets out to present and discuss some aspects of the question. The overall ambition and the main purpose of this study is to contribute to the serious treatment that the question truly deserves.

Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of the present paper is to explore this method strategy in a somewhat systematic and structured fashion. The overall ambition is to offer a general understanding of this method as well as an overview of its potentials and problems. In other words, this paper simply seeks to present and discuss the various theoretical functions and hopes attached to comparison as a method strategy, to explore the special conditions and possibilities as well as the particular difficulties and limitations of this method to generate scientific knowledge. 'Comparison as a scientific method' refers here to the research approach in which two or more cases are explicitly contrasted to each other regards to a specific phenomenon or along a certain dimension, in order to explore parallels and differences among the cases. A more specific formulation of the focal questions in this study sounds as follows: What are the various common uses of comparison within the social sciences? And What are the merits and limitations of the ways in which comparative analysis is designed? Given that, this paper begins with a short history of comparison, demonstrating the variety of uses of this method in classical and modern social thought. It then proceeds by discussing the common purposes usually pursued by its usage, deploying some of the existing typologies and exemplifying each mode of usage by a few well-known cases of comparative analysis. In the last section some of the problems associated with this method are discussed and, finally, some tentative remarks conclude this paper.

Method and Material

To give a systematic presentation of the various ways in which comparative research is commonly conducted a typology is used here. This typology is borrowed from Tim May (1993) and is contrasted with a couple of other ones, offered by some of the major authorities within the field such as Theda Skocpol and Charles Tilly. By doing so the discussion is put within the broader context of theoretical debate concerning the various functions of comparison.

Moreover, to tackle the issue, a number of comparative studies belonging to different social scientific disciplines are used in order to demonstrate and examine what aims scholars pursue and how they actually go about in their comparative research. Although the choice of these studies has not been guided by some logical or substantive rule, what has nonetheless been sought after is a satisfactory degree of representation, i.e. a good enough variety of cases coming from various disciplines and research traditions.

The Spread Use of Comparison

The use of comparison in the study of human society, history and culture has a long history. The legacy of comparative work in the field of social theory can be traced back at least to the Greek Antiquity and, never interrupted, this sustained tradition has since then been only reinforced as the time has passed. In our own time, due to certain historical developments like the enormous increase in communications, technological advances and the immanent intensification of internationalisation tendencies, comparative research, especially cross-national comparison, has increasingly been receiving much attention and, as a result, the bulk of contemporary human and social sciences abounds with examples of comparative approaches. In this section however we shall just take a brief look at a rather arbitrarily chosen set of studies, belonging to different fields, in which this method strategy has been adopted, and this is done merely in order to demonstrate the spread and general applicability of comparison across disciplinary boundaries.

Alexis de Tocqueville for instance in two of his major studies – *Democracy in America and The Old Regime and the French Revolution* – undertakes a comparative analysis although he does so without elaborating on his methodology in any explicit way and uses comparison in chiefly an unsystematic and impressionistic fashion. What primarily preoccupies him in these studies is to account for the emergence of liberty and social equality by comparing two extreme cases: First, as an approximation to the pure case of democratic society he looks toward the United States of America where its law of inheritance calls for equal partition of property and where the social evolution toward equality seems to have reached its ‘natural’ limits. Contrasting to that, Tocqueville examines the eleventh century France as an approximation to the pure case of a society organised along aristocratic principles where the territory is divided among a small number of families who are the owners of the soil and, in that capacity, the rulers of the inhabitants.

Turning to the more stringent use of comparison in the social sciences, we find Max Weber’s famous work, *The Protestant Ethics and the Spirit of Capitalism*, where he, in polemic with Karl Marx, seeks to give a fuller account of the rise of the modern rational capitalism by comparing West with other civilisations of the world. Without refuting Marx’s theory based on the importance of economic factors, Weber tries to demonstrate that the rise of Western capitalism could not exclusively be explained in economic terms. Using a historical comparative method he argues that, in addition to purely economic factors, what also is needed for rational capitalism to emerge is the particular ethics derived from the Calvinistic doctrine of predestination that existed only in some parts of the West. As interpreted by Talcott Parsons (1968), Weber supposedly demonstrated that whereas in economic and political terms China (and perhaps India) was as favourably placed to develop capitalism, it lagged in religious spirit. Puritanism in particular and Christianity in general were decisive causes.

To take another example, one should also mention Emile Durkheim (1982:147 & 157) who, seeking to establish the methodological rules of the nascent discipline of sociology, maintains that “since social phenomena clearly rule out any control by the experimenter, the comparative method is the sole one suitable for sociology” and that “comparative sociology is not a particular branch of sociology; it is sociology itself, in so far as it ceases to be purely descriptive and aspires to account for facts.” Comparing a number of Western European societies in his classical study of suicide at the end of the nineteenth century, Durkheim succeeds in supporting the theory that, far from being a private act of isolated individuals, suicide is a social phenomenon with rather stable observable regularities. And by doing so he manages successfully to challenge psychologists and help sociology establish as a distinct academic discipline.

Among the more recent example, one can easily find a large number of comparative works dealing with the overall issue of modernisation and various dimensions of this process. One major theme within this context concerns the question to what extent it is justified to speak of a universally valid model of, and a general common path to, modernisation. Most comparative studies carried out in this vein set out to examine various national development patterns in order to find similarities and differences among comparable societies. An influential work here is Cyril Black’s *Dynamics of Modernisation* (1967), which quite ambitiously provides a paradigm for doing comparative research. Rooted in the modernisation theories, the author aims in this book at identifying and describing several distinct general patterns in the macro-process by which historically evolved institutions such as state and family adjust to the rapidly changing social functions.

Economic development in general and industrialisation in particular is evidently a central theme vividly debated in the studies of modernisation and the classical works of Walt Rostow and Alexander Gerschenkron are well-known examples of using comparative method in order to underpin the attempts to elaborate empirically founded general theories of development. In his influential book, *The Stages of Economic Growth*, from 1960 Rostow develops an interesting theory of industrialisation derived from comparing a number of countries with various experiences of economic development. Essential to this theory is the identification of a number of stages or phases through which every industrialising country is bounded to go on its way towards modernity. According to the general scheme of development that Rostow puts forth in this book, each nation is thus to follow the same path, passing through same phases of development with the same problems and similar solutions. Although this kind of stage-theories are almost totally out of fashion now, but at the time the book enjoyed much attention and proved to have considerable impact upon the debate, mostly due to the comparative arguments that Rostow uses to sustain his general scheme.

Only a couple of years later, Gerschenkron too uses international comparisons to offer an empirically supported theory of the industrial development of Europe, which, although now outdated and criticised severely, in its structure remains a great achievement. Central to his theory that is put forth in his *Economic Backwardness in Historical Perspective* (1962) is the comparison between national industrialisation processes in Europe, in order to find some basis or a set of fundamental similarities and significant differences that can be generalised. On the basis of comparisons undertaken, he proposes that the tempo and mechanisms of economic growth varies systematically from 'early' to 'late' developers; the state, for example, appears to play a larger, more active and direct role in the accumulation and investment of capital among the latecomer nations. Furthermore, like Rostow, Gerschenkron aspires to develop a theory of a normal or standard path to modernisation with a universally recurrent sequence of phases.

Another common topic in the context of modernisation theories is the so-called German *Sonderweg* (literally, German special path) thesis. According to this thesis which was worked out by the German historians of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, the German path to modernity illustrates a historical singularity, i.e. a historically unique phenomenon contrasting to what has been the common path of other Western countries to modernity. What are emphasised in this view are some of the country's special geographic and historical situation, such as Germany's pronounced statism in contrast to Western parliamentarism, the German *Kultur* as opposed to the Western *Zivilization*, and the early development of the social welfare system in Germany in contrast to the economically liberal *laissez-faire* of the West (see Kocka 1999. For a similar kind of work dealing with the particularity of the United States of America see Lipset 1996).

Yet another frequently examined phenomenon in the context of modernity is European revolutions. Several important studies can be mentioned here: Barrington Moore's *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy* (1966) Jack Goldstone's *Revolution and Rebellion in the Early Modern World* (1991), Charles Tilly's *European Revolutions* (1993) and Theda Skocpol's *States and Social Revolutions* (1979) – many of them to be considered below. More recently, however, we have witnessed a powerful renewal of interest in political economy, i.e. the tradition typically characterised by the insight that economic life is constituted by and through power relations, suggesting that, therefore, it can be best understood by learning about the power structures and strategies prevalent in society at large. Central to this research current is the observation that among the Western welfare states there is by far more variation than their structural similarities may suggest. And against this background, quantitative cross-national comparison is adopted by this tradition as the most fruitful methodological strategy (See Shalev 1996. See also Janoski & Hicks 1994:2 and Kindleberger 2000).

Comparison as a Mode of Scientific Production

Being a natural and elementary function of human mind, the act of comparing like and unlike phenomena is one of the most profound and generative perceptual processes on which much of our reasoning rests. Comparison is so fundamental to our cognition that thinking without comparison is almost unthinkable. Yet, naturalness in itself is far from being a reliable enough property to guarantee production of scientific knowledge and unless comparative mode of analysis is disciplined according to the principles of production of science its results do not qualify as scientific. In this section we therefore present some of the main insights and arguments regarding the scientific worth of comparison and the necessary conditions required for securing the scientific quality of the knowledge generated through comparison. Broadly speaking, comparison is an approach often seen as a method of the explicit contrasting of two or more cases to explore parallels and differences. Frequently, these cases are compared with regards to a specific phenomenon, like revolution, state formation processes, particular policies or types of organisation, etc. More often than not, the main goal is to arrive at a typology based on the observed differences and similarities among cases, even though better understanding of singular cases does constitute a major purpose in many comparative studies.

Historical comparisons are mostly synchronic but sometimes diachronic, comparing events, processes and structures in different periods. In general, however, comparisons are typically international but sometimes are also national as well as regional. Occasionally, entire cultural zones or civilisations constitute the units of comparative analysis. And finally, comparisons usually concentrate on a limited number of cases even though all-inclusive approaches, embracing the whole globe, are not too rare. In more exact terms, however, comparison is a mode of scientific analysis that sets out to investigate systematically two or more entities with respect to their similarities and differences, in order to arrive at understanding, explanation and further conclusions. So defined comparative works are marked off from those considering only one entity or phenomenon as well as those that seek to acquire knowledge about the mutual influences and the interplay between two or more units of investigation.

Furthermore, as the definition above conveys, comparison is hardly an end in itself but serves other objectives and as this paper unfolds it becomes clear that, far from being a univocal method strategy, comparison consists of a variety of approaches, each with a particular set of functions and ambitions attached to this method. Therefore, as Kocka (1996:197-8) – whom the definition above is borrowed from – suggests, comparative works should be reflexive in the sense that it should be clear “why what is being compared with what, in what respect and with what aim.” Against this background it seems plausible to start by considering the various functions and purposes attached to comparison by different scholars. At the outset, we may begin by presenting two extreme views on the issue. At the one end, there is the positivistic view, perhaps best represented by Neil Smelser (1976:2-4), according to whom there exists no real ground for speaking of comparative analysis as a distinct mode of inquiry.

Apparently drawing on Durkheim, Smelser is of the view that the analysis of evidently dissimilar units does not present any methodological problems unique to itself and that all the difficulties that may appear in such an analysis are basically the same as those in all other types of social scientific investigations. Therefore, it is hardly surprising that comparison, implicit or explicit, have pervaded almost all social scientific works from the beginning, and it still does. Yet, the comparative study of dissimilar social entities has, according to Smelser, some specific features. First, it may be justified to deploy comparison as a less adequate substitute for experimental research and/or statistical analysis, because it may be hard and even impossible to manipulate social phenomena as in an experiment and/or there may not be enough cases to make statistical measures meaningful enough; and secondly through comparison many methodological problems – such as establishing equivalent measures or controlling for the third variable – may stand clearer to the investigator.

The other extreme position, often taken by historians, derives from the emphasis upon the particular character of the human sciences, distinguishing them from the natural ones, rejecting thus the conformity of the former to the methodological rules of the latter group. Adhering to the notion of uniqueness of historical processes, historians, for instance, frequently call into question the adequacy of comparison and discard its potentials for generating reliable knowledge especially causal regularities and law-like tendencies. For them, every historical situation contains a number of potential possibilities capable of being realised and the knowledge about some initial conditions is never sufficient to assert that the specific situation under observation will develop along any predicted path and according to any presumed order. Commenting on the old fashion grandiose attempts of earlier social thinkers like Herbert Spenser, August Comte, Karl Marx and others to discover universal patterns of social change and development, Gershenkron (1966:5), for instance, holds that modern historians have grown modest and have abandoned the “prophetic flavour” and the “childlike faith” of their predecessors “in a perfectly comprehensible past whose flows was determined by some exceedingly simple and general historical law.”

Between these two extremes, however, there is an array of positions regarding the valuation of comparative mode of analysis and, indeed, most comparative studies carried out can be localised between the extreme positions. Against this, there have been several attempts at transcending the apparently uncompromising and artificially held dualism between the two extreme positions, trying to gain more subtle insights based on the actual empirical comparative research and, as the debate on the potentials and limitations of the method continues, several typologies have developed with regards to the worth and place of comparison as a scientific method, most of them focusing upon the possible leverages of this method in developing our theoretical comprehension of the social reality. One of the most influential figures in this debate is Charles Tilly, a historically interested sociologist who has done a number of comparative studies on the early European modernity. In his now classical book on comparative method, *Big Structures, Large Processes, Huge Comparisons* (1984) he develops a four-folded typology which has been well-received and quite established.

There are of course a number of other typologies, for instance those developed by Ragin (1987) and by Skocpol and Somers (1978), but in the presentation here what has been used as the schematic device to give a somewhat systematised presentation of comparative strategies is a typology offered by Tim May in his book, *Social Research*, from 1993. Unlike Tilly's typology which is primarily developed with historical-sociological research in mind, that of May is of a more general character, and therefore chosen here. As we proceed however we try to draw a parallel between the two, pointing out the tangible substantive similarities between them. In order to bring some structure into the variety of valuations of comparison, May (1993:157) offers a four-folded typology, including the import-mirror view, the difference view, the theory-development view and, finally, the prediction view.¹

Highlighting the Particularity

The first category captures the general reflexive function of comparison, i.e. the function it has for the broadening our sight, widening our horizon and seeing things in perspective. It refers, in other words, to the view that suggests that comparative analysis is worthwhile because, by taking into consideration social actions and events belonging to other contexts, it enables us to see better the implicit and often taken-for-granted basis of our own practices and phenomena. According to May, whereas on "an instrumental (i.e. practical) level" the results generated by comparative study may permit the importation of different methods of organising a society's affairs to improve their efficiency, it also makes us "reflect upon our own social systems and cultural ways of behaving." Comparison possesses, therefore, the potential of revealing and challenging our less evident assumptions and conceptions about the world, especially the familiar one of oneself.

A similar point is made by Kocka (1996:202) who holds that "often the look into the other country, the other society, the other village or the other part of the world affords better understanding of one's own history." He refers to this kind of comparative analysis as the contrastive comparative method - a mode of analysis often motivated and adopted for the purpose of better grasping one's own peculiarity. In addition to the case of the so-called German *Sonderweg* (see above), Kocka mentions Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism as an example of this kind of comparative study, arguing that in this work Weber looks comparatively at other civilisations mainly to gain insights about the particular development in his own occidental civilisation. Asking why similar phenomena did not occur elsewhere Weber is, Kocka holds, primarily interested in understanding better the path of Western development and the features and properties particular to that.

This kind of comparative analysis is labelled individualising comparison by Tilly (1984:87-9) who, like Kocka, mentions Weber's comparison of the world religions as an attempt to specify the uniqueness of the West, never abandoning "the search for the secret of rationalism's triumph (there)." As another example, Tilly (1984:90) names Nation Building and Citizenship where the author, Reinhard Bendix, compares Western Europe, Russia, Japan, German, and India, in order to specify the uniqueness of the process that in West alone led the creation of a national political community: a national state in which citizens had enough confidence in their rulers and their institutions that the rulers could handle change without destroying their capacity to rule. Bendix's another major work, *Kings or Peoples* (1978) too is mentioned by Tilly (1984:91) as a case of individualising comparison where Bendix seeks to demonstrate and understand the uniqueness of the historical process that in the West, and only there, led to the establishment of popular sovereignty, by comparing it to the hereditary monarchy as the mode of rule prevalent in the rest of the world in the sixteenth century. Used in this fashion, comparative analyses serve the more explicit profiling of individual, and often particularly interesting, cases.

In doing so, they may prove to have what Tilly (1984:145) calls a "rare clarifying power." Moreover, it may also serve the identification of problems and issues, which would not be seen without it, as one is led to assume something analogous should or might have taken place elsewhere. At any rate, this kind of comparison may prove useful in leading to posing significant and sometimes novel questions and, furthermore, can help place some local phenomenon in a broader context, serving thus as a kind of rough check on proposed explanations. Yet, it should also be kept in mind that, as Kocka points out, this type of studies often tend to be rather unsymmetrical. That is, frequently the other cases brought up for comparison are only roughly sketched and reduced to elements that make up a rather vague background against which the main case in focus can be contrasted. Therefore, as Weber's study illustrates this fully, the comparison is only hinted at and one cannot really speak of a fully-fledged comparative analysis. This point finds an echo in George Fredrickson (1997:23) who makes a distinction between research that is truly comparative and one that uses comparison only in a relatively brief and casual fashion. Accordingly, many of studies that claim to be comparative are not so in the full sense of the term since they do not have as their main objective the systematic comparison of some process or institution across the compared units.

Therefore, they are hardly much more than one-case studies that use some “exotic analogy” in order to shed additional light on the particular issue that lies in the centre of their attention.

Discovering Convergences and Deviations

The second type of comparative studies are that clustered by May under the label of the difference view represents the mode of analysis that undertakes to explore, understand and explain differences across apparently similar units. An important characteristic feature in this type of studies concerns the revealing of divergences and variations within what is presumed to be a united and undifferentiated category of units. Given the fact that no social phenomenon or process recurs in the same form, this kind of comparison promises to help us make sense of the observed variations and capture the principles of both similarities and differences. In other words, a comparative examination is undertaken involving sufficiently similar entities but differing in the respect of a phenomenon of particular interest. Such a comparison of the phenomenon in question across various settings will thus, according to this view, enable us to see the divergent formations of the phenomenon and ask why some have developed in similar ways while others is different ways. These types of studies are by Tilly (1984:116) referred to as variation finding comparisons, understood as studies that through comparing multiple forms of a single phenomenon seek to unearth systematic differences among instances and establish a principle of variation in the character or intensity of that phenomenon.

An example here is Gösta Esping-Andersen’s comparative study of the modern Western welfare states, from 1990. In this comparative study the author seeks to reveal the major differences among these apparently similar societies and to lay bare the fundamental properties that unite and divide them, developing a typology into which various welfare states are classified. Using a considerable amount of data and a set of ‘ideal-type’ welfare regimes (liberal, conservative and social democratic), he succeeds in showing how countries’ welfare states have evolved as a result of different historical forces.² Another example in this regard is Ian Taylor’s volume (1990) where he sets to compare five Western-style societies in order to bring into light the variations among them, regarding the adoption of free-market policies. The focal point here is that comparison is used to illuminate the fact that these societies, due to their cultural specificities, respond differently to policies derived from the liberal doctrine of free market.

Yet another example here is Nancy Green’s (1997) study of the modern Jewish Diaspora. Carrying out what she calls ‘divergent comparison’, Green is mostly interested in demonstrating that, although Eastern European Jews who immigrated to the West remained for a while a single, firmly tied and undifferentiated ethnic community, they nonetheless relatively soon started to differentiate and, thereby, the group begun to disintegrated. Unsatisfied with the existing migration studies, the author deploys comparison to support her thesis and to demonstrate the actual differentiation among Jews along socio-economic and cultural dimensions; and by showing the relatively great importance of the actual life conditions she challenges the unwarrantedly presumed impact of an invariant ethnicity and the subsequent similarity of immigrant Jews all over the world.

A classical example here, however, is Moore’s famous *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy* from 1966, which deserves to be considered in more details. Comparing the agrarian sources of modernity in England, France, the United States, China, Japan and India, Moore endeavours in this book to explore the varied political roles played by the two major socio-economic classes of the pre-modern agrarian societies, namely, the landed upper class and the peasantry, in the transformation of these societies into modernity. The focal point in Moore’s analysis is to explore how in each context, the landed social groups of objectively similar structural positions played different roles in responding to some common general societal transformation and how the actual paths and outcomes of the interplay of social forces turned divergent.

As Moore (1966:viii) declares, in some what more specific terms, the study is “an attempt to discover the range of historical conditions under which either or both of these rural groups have become important forces behind the emergence of Western parliamentary versions of democracy, and dictatorships of the right and the left, that is, fascist and communist regimes.” Pursuing this end, he then distinguishes four distinct paths to the modern world: one leads to capitalist democracy by way of bourgeois revolution -as in England, France and the United States; a second to fascism as in the case of Japan (and Germany); a third path leading to communism through the revolutionary mobilisation of the peasantry, as in China (and Russia); and finally the abortive kind of development or stalled democracy, i.e. a democratic form without effective representation, as in India. In conducting this comparative study, however, Moore (1966: xi) is rather modest and does not aim for more than arriving at new sound historical generalisations that, derived through induction, are only to provide us with a preliminary orientation, with a “sketch in a very broad strokes” or a “large-scale map of an extended terrain such as an airplane pilot might use in crossing a continent.”

Furthermore, he also asserts that while such a comparative analysis may help us come a step closer towards specifying configurations favourable and unfavourable to the establishment of modern Western democracy, it is obviously “no substitute for detailed investigation of specific cases” and can never be in place of causal explanations – a point that is in sharp contrast with the third type of comparative studies to be discussed below.

Revealing Causal Generalisations

Finally, the third type of comparative studies consists of those with rather high ambition to use comparison in order to develop causal theories with considerable generality and wide range of applicability. In what May (1993:157) calls the theory-development view, it is believed that comparative approach should not stop at mere description of differences and similarities and development of typologies. Rather comparison can and should be used to extract insights about the causal relationships responsible for the observed similarities and differences. In other words, the overall ambition here is not merely to identify the different actual or possible paths that social processes may take but to develop a causal theory that can explain most of, if not all, the cases under observation. Although the degree of generality and the scope of applicability of the developed theory vary, there is nonetheless the conviction that comparison can, and should, be used to arrive at causal models that transcend the particular cases from which they are derived.

This type of comparative analysis is labelled by Tilly (1984:97) the universalising comparison. He also traces back this mode of comparison to the now out-dated natural history, an analytical tradition in which “the theorist would typically begin with a well-known instance (of any social phenomenon), break the experience of that instance down into a sequence or set of stages, then propose the extension of the sequence of stages to many instances – sometimes to every known instance.” According to Tilly, this mode of analysis is characterised by a systematic comparative examination of the chosen cases, which stand as logically independent instances of the same phenomenon. At the heart of this mode of analysis is the mapping of fundamental similarities between cases, i.e. the causal regularities common to all the cases included in the comparison. On that basis, it is then hoped to arrive at comprehensive and empirically secured theories with explanatory strength so that they can be applied to, and yield insights into, other similar cases. Furthermore, Tilly (1984:98) mentions the two theories of industrialism developed by Rostow and Gerschenkron (see above) as clear examples of this kind of comparative analysis that, in accordance with principles of natural history, seek for regular causal patterns with ordered sequences of the historical transition in question.

The classical work of Skocpol (1979) on social revolutions represents a typical example of comparative studies that seek to go beyond observing the extent to which the compared units differ or are similar, and instead aspire to tab the potential of the method for theory construction. Developing her approach in a spirit of strong opposition to psychological accounts of revolutions, Skocpol adopts a macro-historical approach, dismissing the kind of analysis that locates the origins of revolutions in the desires of revolutionaries to overthrow the state. She instead turns to the structures of these states and looks for the particular vulnerabilities that can be crucial for the revolutionary outcomes of political conflicts. Furthermore, Skocpol (1979:24) emphasises the international and world-historical context of revolutions, an aspect that “no valid theoretical perspective on revolutions can afford to ignore.” Given this particular dimension, she (1979:33) defines social revolution as “rare occurrences in modern world history” that take place only “in particular ways in unique sets of socio-structural and international circumstances;” They are “rapid, basic transformations of a society’s state and class structures, accompanied and in part carried through by class-based revolts from below.”

However, the main point here is that more than looking for some rough orientations of the kind suggested by Moore, Skocpol uses the comparative analysis to develop a general causal theory of social revolutions, i.e. a theory with the general claim of fitting any case of social revolution. Comparing the French, Russian and Chinese revolutions, she (1976:178) thus proposes a general causal model according to which a social revolution can be accounted for in terms of a conjuncture of three developments: 1) the collapse or incapacitation of central administrative and military machineries, 2) widespread peasants rebellions; and 3) marginal elite political movements. Moreover, what each such revolution minimally leads to is “the extreme rationalisation and centralisation of state institutions, the removal of a traditional landed upper class from intermediate (regional and local) quasi-political supervision of the peasantry, and the elimination or diminution of the economic power of a landed upper class.” It should also be mentioned that long before Skocpol, Cane Brinton used comparison to study revolutions aspiring to develop a more general theory. In his little book, *The Anatomy of Revolution from 1938*, he sought to find some fundamental similarities between four major revolutions, namely the English, American, French, and Russian ones and sketched “some tentative uniformities” found in all four old regimes:

1) each one of these societies were experiencing some considerable economic expansion prior to the revolution and the groups most actively participating in the making of revolution were not typically or generally those most harmed by this expansion; 2) Each one of these old societies was torn by bitter class antagonisms; 3) significant numbers of intellectuals had transferred their allegiances away from the old regime; 4) the governmental machinery had grown inefficient; and finally, 5) the old ruling classes had lost confidence in themselves and their traditions. Another interesting study here is the one carried out by Peter Kolchin, namely *Unfree Labor* from 1987, which is a comparative study of two systems of human bondage, American slavery and Russian serfdom, existing at approximately the same time outside the old world. Although specific and sharply differing historical conditions dictated the establishment of these two systems of forced labour, nonetheless Kolchin carries out this comparison in hope of helping him assess the relative weigh of various variables and thereby “distinguish the specific or incidental from the general or inherent” (1987:ix). In other words, while these two systems are by no means seen as identical, Kolchin hopes however that the comparison will “reduce the parochialism inherent in single-case studies” helping him to transcend their particularities and get hold of what can be generalisable.

It should also be added that a less ambitious but nonetheless important function of this kind of comparative analysis is to serve the purpose of criticism, i.e. to help us test the existing causal theories or hypotheses, providing further support for the true ones while revealing the false ones. Moreover it is used to demonstrate the limits to the validity of a theory by showing its shortcomings to explain the new cases. A good example here is Kocka’s (1980) study of the so-called white-collar employers and other petite bourgeois groups with regards to their difficulties in coping with modern industrial society and their subsequent inclination to support extreme right-wing politicians. Comparing Germany with some other Western nations, Kocka argues that these groups in Germany are more privileged by governments and employers over the blue-collar workers, as compared to their American, British, and French counterparts. On this basis he is thus inclined to dismiss the general validity of the assumed correlation between crisis in capitalism and the rise of fascism. To close this section, some words should also be said about the fact that, like in any other typology, the various types of comparative analysis mentioned above represent ideal-type categories discerned or constructed in order to bring out more efficiently the differences between various comparative strategies. In real practice, however, this kind of analytical separation is almost impossible to do as most comparative studies show a mixture of these strategies, aiming at both revealing the underlying generalities as well as understanding the compared units more sharply as their individuality is illuminated in the comparative light.

Limitations of Comparison

The widespread use of comparison can easily cause the impression that this method is a firmly established, smooth and unproblematic mode of analysis, which due to its unquestionable logical status can generate reliable knowledge once some technical preconditions are met satisfactorily. Yet, as we have already seen, comparison is a quite demanding method strategy that requires reflection and careful consideration. Indeed, there are a number of severe limitations and constraints associated with comparison that, calling for serious attention, should warn against and prevent any easy-minded uncritical adoption of this mode of analysis. Any comprehensive and detailed discussion of these limitations and constraints would, however, require a treatment that exceeds the scope of this paper by far. Therefore, in this section only a couple of very elementary issues are taken up for discussion while many other important aspects of the question are left out. One of the most basic issues here regards the autonomy of units chosen for comparison. As various species of entities are picked up to be compared, there is often an underlying and tacit assumption about their autonomy and a silent tendency to ignore the complex interplays and mutual influences among the units.

Facing this difficulty, i.e. the absence of enough independent, self-contained cases to be compared in order to identify causal patterns, the researcher is thus often left with a substitute, namely that of narrating a story instead. To illustrate the point let us take an example. In his major work, *The Sources of Social Power*, Michael Mann (1986:502-3) ponders over the possible causes behind the rise of the West and stagnation of other civilisations. In this context he spends a few moments on alternative, and potentially possible historical outcomes that nonetheless remained unrealised. He then goes on and discusses some of the difficulties in arriving at a definite causal explanation and, among other things, points at the interplay among the compared units as a sever obstacle in developing causal accounts. According to him, since none of these cases was autonomous and detached from the mutual influences that constantly flowed across them, it is hard to identify any tidy indigenous causal patterns.³ On this basis he then holds that “the comparative method has no solution to these problems, not because of any general logical or epistemological defects it might have but because, in dealing with the problems we simply do not have enough autonomous, analogous cases.

Confronted by that empirical reality, we must turn pragmatically to the second method, of careful historical narrative, attempting to establish ‘what happened next’ to see if it has the ‘feel’ of a pattern, a process, or a series of accidents and contingencies. Here we still need explicit but broad concepts and theories about how societies generally work and about how human beings behave, but we employ them in historical narrative, looking for continuity or conjecture, pattern or accident.” Another fundamental issue with far-reaching implications concerns the choice of the units being compared. The main point is that, far from being an innocent and/or simple task, the choice of comparison units is a critical and tricky issue. This point has been observed by many, among them Kocka who, drawing on the experiences from the case of the so-called *Sonderweg* thesis, puts the issue as follows. According to him (1999:49), this case “makes extremely clear the degree to which the results of a comparison depend on the selection of the objects of comparisons. Compared with its Dutch or English parallels, the nineteenth century German economic bourgeoisie appears relatively limited in extent, power, and bourgeois qualities. But compared with east-central or eastern European countries, it appears strong and intensely bourgeois.

The Western comparative perspective makes National Socialism appear deviant; from a southern or south-eastern European perspective, Nazism becomes part of a phenomenon spread across large parts of the continent.” Therefore, Kocka continues by urging us not to omit the consequences of the “selectivity of comparison” and suggests that in many cases “changing the partner compared can make this selectivity conscious and can mitigate the gross (potential) distortions.” Moreover, as we have seen, one of the main reasons for the use of comparison is exactly the small number of the cases of the phenomenon under study. In other words, it is typically the absence of large enough number of cases that prevents the analyst from using the conventional statistical methods. In consequence, comparative studies often embrace only a handful of cases, which in a sense are not chosen freely by the analyst but rather make up a given premise in his or her approach simply because they are the only ones available. That one in his or her research is confined to a small number or, as it often is, to a few cases is of course a serious limitation and constitutes an inherent bias in the structure of comparison, with far reaching implications for the validity of the outcomes of these studies especially with regards to their generality.

This issue deserves due attention especially because every comparative study begins with certain, tacit or outspoken, assumptions about comparability of the chosen units, i.e. the assumption that suggests that it is, at some level of analysis, meaningful to compare these units in some certain aspect or along some particular dimension. Against this background, crucial questions to be addressed seriously are: in what respect and to what extent these given units are really comparable; what conditions are required to make any comparison among them meaningful; how we are to safeguard ourselves against the pitfalls in comparing incomparable units belonging to different contexts; and what are the alternative comparisons that could be carried out with possibly different sets of units, pointing at possibly different conclusions. A closely related matter, and perhaps a consequence of the above, is the issue of asymmetrical comparison. Since the choice range is often radically circumscribed, the analyst is often left with a small number of cases determined by factors beyond his or her power. Under these more or less imposed research conditions, it is often the case that the analyst is forced to conduct a comparison among units not of all of which he or she has equally adequate knowledge.

In turn, this fact often tends to undermine or at least weaken the possibilities of conducting a balanced comparison, i.e. a comparison characterised by equally precise and equally comprehensive attention paid to all the units compared. Put differently, the narrowed options of choice of units joined with the asymmetry of competence may be the main reason accounting for the relative abundance of asymmetrical comparative studies in the human and social sciences. As mentioned earlier, asymmetric comparative studies frequently tend to investigate one case carefully while limiting themselves to a mere sketch of the other cases, which serve as comparative reference points. More often than not, the researcher lack sufficient knowledge about these other cases and is forced to rely heavily upon selected secondary sources the worth of which he is not capable of assessing properly. Max Weber’s famous study of the Protestant ethics can serve as an extremely illustrative example (see above).

As a researcher interested in the question of the rise of the West he is studying a case that represents a historical singularity, i.e. a unique case that nonetheless has to be compared with a given set of other civilisations of which he does not have any significant amount of knowledge and thus has to rely on the authority of other scholars, without being able to assess their scholarship in any proper way. Against this one may thus argue that despite the obvious benefits of such a comparative design, it nonetheless is of rather doubtful value. The problem with this kind of comparison is that in such studies the descriptions of the cases chosen for comparison with the main one tend to become excessively simplified, superficial and stylised with distorted arguments and conclusions as entailment.

One is almost tempted to share Kocka's scepticism and assume that "this form of comparison proves particularly clearly the dependence of knowledge on the (selection of) comparison partner, which as a rule is selected not only on scientific criteria" (1996:203) but rather on the basis of "normative priorities and conventions" (1999:40), thus "abusing the units of comparison" (1999:49).⁴ However, there is also another and somewhat deeper sense of the asymmetric comparison that regards the degree to which the compared cases belonging to different socio-cultural or historical contexts are understood by the analyst. It is often held as one of the decisive merits of the comparative analysis that it allows the 'outsider' to look into a different context than his or her own with fresh eyes and thereby see things invisible to the native researcher. This is of course a strong argument for the use of comparison, especially when one recalls that the familiar world often represents itself to the native observer as self-evident and conceals its arbitrariness, making thus necessary a break with his or her 'natural attitude' towards the familiar world – a break that nonetheless is not always easy to do.

Yet the problem that still lingers on and remains unsolved is the following: To what extent it is possible for a researcher to penetrate into a different context, get acquainted with the universe of meaning pertinent to that context and acquire the relevant insights that are sufficiently deep to put him or her in the position of comparing the unfamiliar worlds of others with his or her own. The problem of asymmetric understanding is in itself an old epistemological problem that has been discussed by many and in a variety of ways (see for instance Fay 1996, Ch 1). Sufficient to mention here is that, unlike the case with the natural sciences, the subject matter of humanities and social sciences are purposeful, intentional and meaning-creating actors and any account of what comprise their social lives – i.e. their perceptions, actions, relations and activities – requires an adequate understanding of the meanings produced and mediated thereby. In other words, when a researcher is examining phenomena that belong to fields far from home, he or she should have the ability to take head of the particularities of the terrain under his or her feet, have the sensitivity that enables him or her to penetrate beneath the apparent similarities and grasp the context-specific meanings attached to the phenomena under observation.

It is not however the argument of this paper to advocate the so-called immensurability of cultural differences, i.e. the notion suggesting the impossibility of cross-cultural understanding. Rather, the point that is wished to be stressed here is that such an understanding is an extremely demanding and time-consuming task that should be sought after with sufficient amount of seriousness. Furthermore, the problem of asymmetric understanding is indeed one of the primary concerns of comparative analysis with important implications that are relevant not only for asymmetric kind of comparison but for all comparative strategies and especially for the comparative approaches designed to find general, cross-contexts-valid causal explanations. This point is put by Robert Anderson, *et al.* (1986), for instance, who draw on Peter Winch (1958) problematisation of the very concept of 'sameness' and the difficulties associated with discerning the same phenomena across what he called various 'forms of life.' On this basis, the authors argue that, in pursuing to compare like with like, comparative research requires the particular ability of recognising sameness or similarity of phenomena across various contexts.

Following the lead offered by Winch, Anderson *et al.* (1986:184) maintain for instance that "in order to decide which institutions of one society – our own in many cases- to compare with those of another we shall need to be able to match those institutions, to say what kind of part they play in their respective society ... However, if we are in a position to say what part each institution plays in the life of its society then we have already achieved a very good understanding of it." One may argue, of course, that deep-level cross-cultural understanding is not called for in all comparative research and hold that there can be, and are, many comparative studies, especially within the field of political science, that do not necessarily delve into the socio-cultural contexts of the phenomena they examine.

Many of such studies stay instead at such a level where many categories and concepts can be used across contexts with no or only minor adjustments. Or, according to this argument, there can be constructed many context-independent concepts that, capturing the universal essence of the phenomena they label, can be used to observe, measure and thus compare the same underlying phenomena across widely various cultures. Many examples of cross-national studies using conventional survey analysis run into mind here, like the comparative studies of party membership, participation in general elections, size of public sector or expenditures, distribution of high political offices among different age-groups, sexes, minorities, etc. The idea of possibility of designing categories and measurements valid across various settings may suggest a solution to the problem of asymmetric comparison, and indeed the field of political science and many other disciplines abound with examples of trans-national comparative studies using the conventional variable analysis to compare various statistically designed measures.

Yet, what is neglected in this view is the fact that the enterprise of comparing even the apparently most straightforward phenomena across contexts with largely similar structures turns out to require far-reaching considerations about national differences in defining, categorising, and measuring apparently common phenomena like savings, and unemployment, let alone more complicated concepts like political engagement, participation, organisation and mobilisation.⁵ An illustrative example here, which is of particular interest to political science, is Tilly's (1984b) notion of the repertoire of collective action. By this notion, he means the set of means, which is available to, and used by, the members of a group for making claims and struggling for them. This repertoire consists of, in other words, action alternatives that seem of feasible to the group, has greater legitimacy and are more frequently deployed by the group.

According to Tilly, the Western European repertoire that evolved in the nineteenth century includes typically strikes, electoral rallies, demonstrations, petition marches and all kinds of public assemblies, often relying on and requiring some kind of formal organisation like trade unions, political parties, voluntary associations, etc. Elaborating on this notion, Ann Swidler (1986) argues that different cultures are marked by different repertoires or 'tool kits' for collective, often political, action. According to her, each culture provides a limited set of resources out of which groups and individual actors construct a number of styles of collective action. In each culture there is thus a limited pool of strategies and modes of organising collective action, sometimes deeply institutionalised, and the point is that this set is culturally variable, i.e. it may vary greatly from one culture to another. What all this amounts to? Given the fundamental problems with the import-mirror view or the individualising comparison, one is hesitant to attach to this design of comparative research any other function than the general reflective ones discussed above.

Given the lack of due attention to the particularities of contexts characterised by the theory-development view or the universalising comparison, it is very doubtful if one can confidently endorse the use of comparative approach to discover general causal theoretical constructions, although some limited functions of hypothesis testing and assessment of applicability range of a theory can be important potentials of this mode of comparative design. Against this, one is thus left with the second type, namely the difference view, the divergent comparison or the variation finding comparison as the only scientifically reliable method strategy. In other words, it appears that if comparison is to be used it cannot be done in any other way than what suggested by John Stuart Mill (1950: 211-216) long time ago, namely as a Method of Difference and a Method of Agreement. Rather than seeking general causal explanations, comparative analysis seem to be capable of offering no more than illustrations demonstrating fruitfulness and shortcomings of theories and models developed otherwise, to show the boundaries of their applicability. As such, comparative method can be used confidently only in the fashion suggested by Moore, i.e. as a rough check on our theories and models, preventing us from going astray and simultaneously stimulating our theoretical imagination, which nonetheless is much needed for the elaboration of these theories and models.

Some Final Remarks

Any comparison is a construction in the sense that it discerns which elements or segments of social reality are to be related to one another and along what dimensions. It selects particular units and/or aspects rather than others, and abstracts them from the context in which they are indiscernibly embedded. It, in other words, brings into fore what is otherwise hidden in the totality of social reality – a reality that in its totality appears as infinite, formless and chaotic. As a construction, comparison thus helps create an ordered perception of this reality, i.e. an organised way to see it in one way rather than in many other alternative ways. Therefore, it should be reflected on, brought into the sphere of awareness, rather than deployed as if it were an unproblematic and self-evident mode of analysis. Furthermore, since comparison organises perception in one way rather than another, one should also be conscious of the kind of order it yields. Not seldom comparative approach is used by researchers to establish a certain new order of things and/or to reinforce the old ones.

Underneath Kocka's dissatisfaction with the abuse of 'other' cases in order to show the particularity of the main case lies this often-used potential of comparative analysis to elaborate and establish hierarchical orders in which civilisations, cultures, societies, and nations are nested, either as cases that are in some respect inferior to the favoured ones or as abnormalities and/or deviations of some path or model that, represented by the favoured cases, is taken to serve as the normality or the point of reference in the comparison. Yet, comparison is still a method with outstanding merits, chiefly because of its ability to make us recognise the narrowness of our mind and check against the shortcomings and harmful consequences of localism and provincialism. We may however have something to learn from historians' hesitation in using comparison and from their respect for the uniqueness of contexts and histories of peoples. One may hope that comparative mode of analysis can be broadened, not only comparing structures, institutions and processes, but also mentalities, experiences, emotions, codes and symbols.

More importantly, one may also hope for a greater respect for particularities of societies and cultures, i.e. the most profound promise of the comparative analysis, namely to reveal the multiplicity of social worlds, the particularity of the researcher's society as well as those of others.

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¹ The fourth type of comparison in May's typology, i.e. the prediction view, represents a category of comparative studies with the ambition of predicting the outcomes of social processes. According to this view, not only can the potential for the alternative outcomes of these processes be identified but also predicted, once experiences of their effects in other settings is examined. To my knowledge, this type of comparative analysis is very rare. In what follows, however, this category is left out both because of its rarity and the implausibility of the very notion of prediction in case of social reality.

² It must however also be noticed that in this study Esping-Andersen pursues a more ambitious project, namely elaborating a causal explanation of the similarities and differences among them and works out an original theoretical framework for contemporary changes in welfare states.

³ With reference to the European miracle debate, Mann (1986: 503) writes, "The comparative method has no solution to these problems [i.e., the problems of identifying autonomous cases], not because of any general logical or epistemological defects it might have but because, in dealing with the problems we simply do not have enough autonomous, analogical cases. Confronted by that empirical reality, we must turn pragmatically to the second method, of careful historical narrative, attempting to establish 'what happened next' to see if it has the 'feel' or a pattern, a process, or a series of accidents and contingencies."

⁴ Similar experience from the way Russia is often compared with the West, with the latter as a point of reference, can easily be found in political scientific literature.

⁵ One should also take into account the point that the general value of conventional survey analysis has increasingly been questioned. As recent debate has been addressing the issue enthusiastically, this mode of survey analysis is hardly capable of producing more than, at best, shallow descriptions of correlations among some observed variables without being of much assistance in unearthing causal patterns among these variables (see Hedström & Swedberg 1998).