

**Dialogue Between Comparativists**  
*A cross-historical analysis*  
by Pablo Ouziel

*“Intellectual life, like all other social spaces, is a home to nationalism and imperialism, and intellectuals, like everyone else, constantly peddle prejudices, stereotypes, received ideas, and hastily simplistic representations which are fuelled by the chance happenings of everyday life.”*  
(Bourdieu 1999, 20)

**Abstract:** Cross-historical analysis of the comparative politics literature reveals a praiseworthy level of technical evolution in the methodological approach. Nevertheless, under close scrutiny, the literature also reveals the inherently ideological and dogmatic nature of this youthful discipline. The pressing need to address this issue requires true introspective analysis, if as comparativists we are to overcome the challenges we face from a globalizing world in which the hegemonic force, which has catapulted us to stardom and blinded our analysis, is losing its hegemony. Of course, this last point being only a forward looking statement, it cannot be substantiated by fact, but nevertheless, judging by the current situation outside of the classroom, it merits serious discussion.

**Introduction**

Void of magnanimous ambition, this research paper is the work of an aspiring social scientist offering honest, yet perhaps naïve criticism, to those who have shaped the discipline in which he seeks to practice. In this sense, rather than offering solutions to structural problems regarding the comparative method, at best these words serve as a shout from the bottom of the ladder, to those on top, warning of the potential weakness of the discipline’s foundations. It is with this thought in mind that this piece is presented, carving out the historical evolution of the social sciences, into the technical advancements of political science through two of its branches of social inquiry: the comparative method and comparative historical analysis, which unavoidably lead us to

the unresolved ideological question, which could potentially mar our standing as a trustworthy social science. By addressing numerous seminal works within the comparative literature to show its progression, and then peeking into the ideological question, perhaps this essay sets the foundations for the dialogue, which sooner or later the discipline must have.

### **Technical evolution of the Comparative Method – *Roots, types and problems***

This section of the paper seeks to carve out the technical evolution of comparative politics, by voicing the views of those who have been instrumental in shaping it. Through their opinions it is easy to understand the bumpy yet linear trajectory, which the discipline has experienced from its inception to its current reality. It is absolutely necessary in order to understand this trajectory, to trace back its history to the birth of the social sciences as a discipline of study.

In *Big Structures, Large Processes, Huge Comparisons*, Charles Tilly acquaints his readers to Alexis de Tocqueville's thinking on how industrial expansion and population mobility challenged the state's integrative power. According to Tilly, out of such reflections on capitalism, national states, and the consequences of their growth, grew the discipline of social sciences. After half a century of prosperity known as the golden age of official statistics and social surveys (from 1870 to 1920), statistics and surveys became more efficient and regular, but lost much of their richness. However, in one form or another, Durkheim, Tocqueville, Weber, and especially Marx, to this day continue setting the agenda of problems raised in the social sciences.

Political science is the social science concerned with the theory and practice of politics and the description and analysis of political systems and political behaviour. According to William Buxton, the community of political scientists exists because of their shared broad metaphysical assumptions, their unifying believe system and the common guides which guide their puzzle-solving activities. It is this unity, which has allowed researchers to debate and evolve the discipline, through rigor, and the constant correction of past mistakes. This becomes apparent as we follow the constructive dialogue between political scientists. For example, in his attempt to improve the study of political science and encourage the development of “fact-finding” and “fact-storing containers,” Giovanni Sartori divides political scientists into “unconscious thinkers” and “overconscious thinkers,” and calls upon the “the conscious thinker to steer a middle course between crude logical mishandling on the one hand, and logical perfectionism (and paralysis) on the other hand” (Sartori 1970, 1033-1043). Sartori then warns of the risks of “conceptual stretching” and “conceptual straining,” the former representing a deliberate attempt to make our conceptualizations value free, and the latter, resulting in a situation where “gains in extensional coverage tend to be matched by loses in connotative precision.” (Sartori 1970, 1035)

Following from this last point, Buxton reminds us of the fact that political science should focus on helping us understand political choices, by focusing on the tensions in the economic and political order of society, using the comparative method of analysis. It is in Buxton’s *Talcott Parsons and the Capitalist Nation State*, that we learn of the *Committee*

*on Research in Comparative Politics* formed at a Princeton conference in 1953, and then through David Collier we are introduced to a lead article in the first issue of the journal *Comparative Politics* in 1968, in which, Harold D. Lasswell argues that comparison is central to good analysis and that therefore the scientific method is unavoidably comparative. According to Collier, it is the impressive funding by U.S foundations (predominantly the Ford Foundation) in the 1970s and 1980s together with institutional momentum, which have made comparative studies into a booming business.

In Ira Katznelson's *Structure and Configuration in Comparative Politics*, we can observe how comparative studies transcended Marxian materialism through Barrington Moore's cross-sectional and static organizational materialism, tilting scholarship from a focus on agency to a focus on structure, which while giving it "coherence and power" also constrained its "reach and range" (Katznelson 1997, 94). From Collier we learn that the data requirements of the comparative method lie between the simpler needs of the case study and the extremely demanding requirements of experimental or statistical research. Tilly then adds, that to be effective with the comparative method the "trick is to have criteria for identifying real populations, categories, networks, or catnets as specimens of the sort of unit about which we are theorizing" (Tilly 1984, 80). Harry Eckstein contributes to this debate, by emphasizing that the main goal of comparative studies is to seek "regularities through the simultaneous inspection of numerous cases" (Eckstein 1975, 105).

According to Theda Skocpol, there are two main ways to carry out comparative analysis. Firstly, what Mill termed the “Method of Agreement,” which tries to establish that cases which have in common the phenomenon which is being explained, also have in common a set of causal factors, and secondly, what Mill labelled as the “Method of Difference,” in which the phenomenon being explained and the causes, are absent in contrasting cases which are otherwise similar to the positive case. From her perspective, it is desirable to combine these two logics “by using at once several positive cases along with suitable negative cases as contrasts” (Skocpol 1979, 37).

In Tilly’s mind, there are four ways of comparison: Individualizing, universalizing, variation-finding, and encompassing, and their relative value “ultimately depends on ontology and epistemology (Tilly 1984, 146). These comparison types, for Tilly, differ only in the statements they yield and not in their logic of comparison, but although he acknowledges that they all have their place in inquiry, his ultimate hope is that scholars “will move increasingly to the historically grounded comparison of limited numbers of experiences” (Tilly 1984, 147). Within the realm of types of comparative analysis, Skocpol and Somers introduce the idea of a “research cycle,” which Collier then claims, “occurs because the inherent weakness of each approach may stimulate work that employs the other approaches.” (Collier 1991, 13)

Although the researchers mentioned above have all been great advocates of the comparative method, in their aim to construct a technically sound field of study, some have critically raised issues, which need to be addressed. For example, in borrowing from

Barrington Moore, Skocpol and Somers explain how a map used by a pilot to cross a certain continent, indifferent of its quality cannot be used to fly over other continents (Skocpol and Somers 1980, 195), thus addressing one of the most pertinent issues concerning comparative politics – what is being compared. Sartori, equally brave has been able to point to the menace to the comparative method, the “growing potpourri of disparate, non-cumulative and – in the aggregate – misleading morass of information,” which according to him, has led to “comparative endeavors without comparative method” (Sartori 1970, 1039-1052). From Colliers perspective, the quantitative comparative approach has been hurt by the publication of too many studies in which concepts are “operationalized with dubious validity” and which employ causal tests that are “weak, unconvincing, or inappropriate” (Collier 1991, 16). He also questions the theoretical parsimony of the comparative method because of the lack of attention by comparativists to “thinking through how well or poorly concepts and categories are serving them” (Collier 1991, 18). For Tully on the other hand, the danger lies in the fact that “with the multiplication of cases and the standardization of categories for comparison, the theoretical return declines more rapidly than the empirical return rises” (Tilly 1984, 144).

### **Technical Evolution of Comparative Historical Analysis**

According to Skocpol the pedigree of comparative historical analysis can be traced back to John Stuart Mill in his *A System of Logic*, and has been effectively applied by classical social and historical analysts such as Alexis de Tocqueville and Marc Bloch, with its continual application by contemporary scholars, including Barrington Moore (Skocpol 1979, 36). To this explanation, Katznelson adds that it was Barrington Moore who

transformed the objectives and aspirations of comparative historical microanalysis (Katznelson 1997, 89), and Collier, adds Skocpol to the list of pioneers of comparative historical analysis.

For Tully, comparative historical analysis is necessary “in order to see whence we have come, where we are going, and what real alternatives to our present condition exist” (Tilly 1984, 11). To Skocpol, comparative historical analysis offers a tool with which to “generalize about social revolutions, to develop explanations of their causes and outcomes” (Skocpol 1979, 35). In *The Uses of Comparative History in Macrosocial Inquiry*, Skocpol and Somers, eloquently explain the three distinct logics of analysis and exposition being deployed in comparative history: “the ‘parallel demonstration theory’ aiming to reveal how a general theory holds for diverse instances; the ‘contrast contexts’ directed at showing how the particularity of cases affects and modifies more general social processes; and ‘macro-causal analysis’ which uses comparative history primarily for the purpose of making causal inferences about macro-level structures and processes” (Katznelson 1997, 92). It is Skocpol however, who reminds us of the ultimate objective of comparative historical analysis, “the actual illumination of causal regularities across sets of historical cases” (Skocpol 1979, 39).

### **Ideological problem**

Once the technical developments of the discipline of comparative politics have been carved out, it is important to address the issue of ideology as it relates to these developments. Considering the fact that as Buxton clearly states, one of the goals of the

development of the comparative method was to supply friends and allies with examples of democratic philosophy at work as part of the ideological war, it seems to me absolutely necessary to focus our attention on the role of ideology as it has paralleled the technical development of the discipline. In his criticism to political scientists, Easton points to the fact that “few of them are ready to study their own behaviour rationally.” Where they have been able to apply certain methods of research in their studies, they have failed to apply them when analysing themselves. Therefore, while some have applied class analysis to explain developments in political science, they have been unwilling to apply “psychoanalysis or theories of political clientilism”(Easton 1990, 52), to explain their own reality.

In *Social Science and Political Theory*, Walter Garrison Runciman attempts to address the issue of ideology and its consequences on research, when he points to Marx and Weber. According to Runciman, for Marx social science and social values are mutually involved because all social thought is liable to be ideological, and for Weber social science and social values are involved because the social sciences must be value-relevant, but this does not prevent the conduct of an actual sociological investigation from being value-free. In light of the fact that as Buxton informs us, with the evolution of the discipline, the political scientist has assumed the role of a political engineer contributing to political development, the ideological questions cannot be left to a debate between the writings of Weber and Marx. I make this point, because it seems illogical to assume that political engineers can contribute to politics without ideological determinants, and

therefore, I wonder whether political engineers can be considered value-free political scientists.

According to Easton, due to the global hegemony of the United States after World War Two and the early institutionalization of political science, global institutionalization of political science has been influenced by the American perspective. The coming into being of this global universal in the politico-scientific experiment, influenced by American scholarship, requires honest analysis into the role played by the political scientist in this expansion. Pierre Bourdieu in reference to translation speaks of the process of labelling and classification by which the person presenting the work tends to slant it towards his own point of view. This Bourdieu claims leads honest researchers to asking, “how it comes about that a certain writer or editor becomes the importer of a certain thought” (Bourdieu 1999, 23). If we are to accept that the process of interpretation and translation of words resembles that of the interpretation and translation of political events, then we must analyze with great care the intentions of political scientists when conducting social research.

In *The Development of Political Science*, Easton mentions Quentin Skinner, who “argues that in the historical study of ideas one should always study the intentions of a scholar by taking into account both the social and intellectual conditions of the idea” (Easton 1990, 45). How then, can we ignore Moore’s statement, in which he explains the aim of his research is to specify “configurations favourable and unfavourable to the establishment of modern western democracy” (Katznelson 1997, 89), or Katznelson’s statement, that

Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* was influenced by his "broadly liberal values and fears in a revolutionary world" (Katznelson 1997, 97)?

More importantly, how can we ignore Buxton's thoughts, when he tells us that the stated intention of comparative politics was the spread of democracy? As he explains it, "by enunciating a political theory that indicated the disparity between the Anglo-American political system and other forms of political organizations, the researcher could provide the policy elites of these countries with a developmental model alternative to communism" (Buxton 1985). A situation, which Buxton emphasizes, could potentially be beneficial to the global interests of the Ford Foundation.

With all the above points considered, Bernard Crick's idea that despite the pretensions of an objective value-free study of politics, American political science manifests 'strong assertions of political doctrine' which make it more an example of American political thought than a science" (Easton 1990, 18), seems to resonate with the current state of political science and indeed comparative politics. If to this initial ideological slant, we then add Christopher H. Achen's statement on the core problem of quasi-experiments, being "the lack of randomization in who gets the 'treatment' and who does not, which may be referred to as selection bias" (Collier 1991, 20), what we are left with, is a discipline of study, which marked by its historical legacy of ideological indoctrination, needs to dedicate more time to demonstrating its balanced approach to the scientific endeavour. This last point only being relevant, if as comparative political scientists we wish our discipline to undergo a true process of globalization, which will allow us to

remain relevant in what is quickly becoming a multi-polar world. As the hegemony of the imperial power, which facilitated our rise to fame, quickly deteriorates, I fear we have no choice but to begin addressing this issue. Our technical evolution can take us far within the boundaries we erect and define, but in a world where these boundaries are erected through negotiation with external actors, intellectual honesty will take us much farther.

Once upon a time protestant missionaries went to China camouflaging “the religious doctrines with secular knowledge that they thought was either desired by or already inculcated into the Chinese elite” (Liu 1999, 138). For many years, comparativists have been operating in a similar way, but projecting into the future, there seems to be little room for this in our rapidly changing geo-political, economic and social order.

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