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Comparative Historical Analysis

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IN A NUTSHELL:

Comparative historical analysis combines two major methodological tools of social science, comparison (the study of similarities and differences across cases) and history (the analysis of processes of change in their temporal dimension), to help explain large scale outcomes on a variety of topics. It is particularly useful to account for the definition of public policies (policy framing and policy change).

Keywords: Mixed method, qualitative method, historical analysis, similarities, differences, history, macro, comparison, critical junctures, path dependency

I. What does this approach consist of?

Comparative historical analysis (CHA) is more an approach than a method, and it is rooted in a long history from old seminal works, e.g. *De la Démocratie en Amérique* (Tocqueville 1960) and *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (Weber 2001) to modern classics, e.g. *The Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy* (Moore 1966) and *States and Social Revolutions* (Skocpol 1979). The historical approach in social sciences offers explanations of large-scale outcomes on a wide range of topics, such as revolutions, the advent of democratic or authoritarian rule, path dependent institutional processes, policy continuity and change in various domains. This approach has several distinctive characteristics that have fostered its extensive use in social science research and public policy.

CHA explores similarities and differences across different cases – recalling John Stuart Mill’s method of agreement and difference – with the aim to unveil causal mechanisms that determine specific outcomes (see separate brief on case studies). Processes of change and their temporal dimension are at the core of sociology and political science, and for this reason CHA helped the identification of the origin of specific reforms, or the point of departure for significant institutional change. The cases analysed are often nation-states, but other entities (such as regions, social movements and organisations) have also been scrutinised (for an example of regional analysis, see Ferragina 2012; 2013). This approach attributes a big role to theory, and a very interesting debate has taken place on the *American Journal of Sociology*, with a symposium comparing the place assigned to theory in historical sociology and rational choice theory: “we’re no angels: realism, rational choice, and relationality in social science” (see the contributions to this debate of Somers 1998; Kiser and Hechter 1998; Goldstone 1998; Calhoun 1998). The debate contrasted the use of these different perspectives, highlighting that CHA helps to test and generate theory through a macro-configurational, case-based and temporally-oriented approach.

The macro component concerns large-scale outcomes, i.e. state building, democratic transitions, societal patterns of inequality, war and peace. Researchers focus on large-scale causal factors, including both political-economic structures (e.g. colonialism) and complex organisational institutional arrangements (e.g. social policy regimes). This macro approach can also explain micro-level events and processes that should (or should not) be present within particular cases if the macro theory is correct. The configurational component refers to the way in which researchers consider how multiple factors combine to form coherent causal packages. One for example cannot study revolutions without analysing how various events and underlying processes constitute these social phenomena. Even when CHA scholars are interested in studying the effects of a specific variable they care a lot about the context and other potential causes. Differently from other techniques commonly used in social science, CHA does not shy away from complex questions for which data are not readily available. One of the most regrettable trends in social sciences is the selection of questions on the basis of available data. As in the Nietzschean metaphor, it is as if researchers are like drunk people who search their lost keys only under the lamppost. For this reason, CHA focuses on real world puzzles and uses mechanisms-based explanations, following questions of

this kind: why do cases that are similar on many key dimensions exhibit different outcomes on a dependent variable of interest? Or alternatively, why do seemingly disparate cases all have the same outcome? Moreover, real world puzzles may also be formulated when particular cases do not conform to expectations from existing theory or large-N research. CHA places emphasis on developing a deep understanding of the cases to adjudicate competing hypotheses.

Without the pretension of being exhaustive, it is important to mention here the most used conceptual tools in CHA, that is critical junctures, path dependency and other devices to capture gradual change. Collier and Collier (1991: 29) have defined critical junctures as periods of significant change that occur producing durable effects. Critical junctures unsettle previous institutional patterns and open to a new period of path dependency. Path dependency indicates that when a nation or another macro-unit of analysis has started to move in one direction, the costs to revert the trajectory are very high and this contributes to a sort of inertia that can be broken again only with a new critical juncture (Pierson 2004). In simple terms: history matters.

While critical junctures and path dependency are used to describe the succession of radical change and stability, other conceptual tools indicate the presence of a gradual change that can progressively produce conspicuous change. Streeck and Thelen (2005) classified this form of change into five categories: Displacement, that is when a traditional institutional structure is progressively discredited and put at the margins in favour of those that are more apt to satisfy present needs. Layering, that is when new elements are progressively added to the old structure. This form of institutional change is often observed in social policy, for example in the field of labour market and family policy (Daly and Ferragina 2018). Institutional change can also happen just because an institution becomes obsolete to respond to its original aims as it has not been adequately updated over time (this form of institutional change is called drift (Hacker 2004). Another form of institutional change is that of conversion, that is when an existing institution is redirected towards new objectives. A last form is that of exhaustion, that brings the institution to a progressive disappearance.

II. How is this approach useful for policy evaluation?

CHA can be employed to understand how to set up a policy evaluation study, recognize the origins of specific policies, better understand the context within which policies and outcomes change, and observe an institutional trajectory in the long run. In a nutshell, a CHA can help to situate specific policy evaluations within a context, illustrating for example the concatenation of policy changes that bring to a fundamental institutional change in the long run (in this respect see the example below about 'selective neoliberalism'). Major works that absolve these functions in the literature include *The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism* (Esping-Andersen 1990), *Development and Crisis of the Welfare State* (Huber and Stephens 2001), *Dismantling the Welfare State? Reagan, Thatcher, and the Politics of Retrenchment* (Pierson 1994), and *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers: The Political Origins of Social Policy in the United States* (Skocpol 1992).

III. Disentangling the direction of social policy reforms in the long run: the case of 'selective neoliberalism'

CHA can be employed to disentangle how several reforms might lead to specific outcomes, linking a theoretical concept to the exploration of policy change. This is the case of a study published in *New Political Economy* that explores how Italy progressively liberalised pension and labour market policies in different steps (Ferragina and Arrigoni 2021); if one analyses reforms in isolation, one cannot correctly observe the comprehensive design of the liberalisation process. This means that an historical analysis might allow us to discern the entire reform process. The study, although only analysing the Italian case,

is based on the comparison with other European countries through the framing of the passage from the Fordist to the neoliberal phase of capitalism. More specifically this research illustrates the Italian process of neoliberal institutional adaptation in the main social policy reforms, and suggests that over three decades this process took place selectively. Selective neoliberalism is defined as a modality of institutional adaptation which started from the margins and then expanded to the rest of society.

Selective neoliberalism resulted from a reform process begun in the early 1990s when a neoliberal turn was set in motion (Ferragina et al. 2022). The reform process, with continuity between centre-right and centre-left coalitions, circumvented the resistance of trade unions against an overall social policy liberalisation, hitting first social groups without sufficient power resources to defend their social entitlements and rights. This modality of institutional adaptation can be observed in both labour market and pension reforms.

Through the concept of selective neoliberalism, the initial dualization of social entitlements and rights in the Italian case is interpreted as an intermediary step toward liberalisation (for a discussion see Streeck 2009, Emmenegger 2014). This argument is substantiated with an analysis of the continuity in the social policy reforms, and through insights from comparative historical analysis. Neoliberal ideas, promoted originally by Einaudi in the first part of the twentieth century and kept alive in intellectual circles in the post WWII period, re-emerged like a subterranean river when the international political economy context had turned globally away from Keynesianism. The spread of neoliberal ideas influenced Italian technocratic elites at the Bank of Italy and the Treasury, and also the internal debate of the Socialist (PSI) and Christian Democratic (DC) parties since the 1980s.

The research sequences the 'roll back' of Fordism and the 'roll out' of neoliberalism, and through this historical institutional analysis, it identifies a neoliberal turn in 1992. Different streams of literature have emphasised this year's importance for Italy – which can be regarded as a sliding door on the institutional, economic, and political levels. The notion of critical juncture is used to illustrate how after 1992, the institutional equilibrium was broken; and this gave way to a series of reforms very much at odds with the past. From a methodological perspective 'junctures are "critical" because they place institutional arrangements on paths or trajectories, which are then very difficult to alter' (Pierson 2004: 135). This analytical tool helps to identify a transition from Fordism to neoliberalism as portrayed in the international political economy literature. Then, the concept of selective neoliberalism helps to interpret the labour market and pension reforms holistically. This notion can be applied to other countries and policy contexts, in particular where a strong resistance of veto players is undermined through an incremental reform process that contributes to a neoliberal adaptation.

IV. What are the strengths and limitations of this approach compared to others?

CHA presents advantages and disadvantages in comparison to other methods and approaches. It is unique in helping to address big questions and the analysis of political processes, allowing it to systematically disentangle complex reform processes as we have shown with the example of selective neoliberalism. The application of an historical approach allows one to consider with care the specificity of cases, observe their long term development, proposing in the end contingent generalisations. However, CHA also presents several limits. The approach does not propose a systematic way to approach problems as other methods of analysis. It is difficult to select cases when testing theories, and generalisation, although possible, has to be contingent and limited (because of the small-N). Moreover, this approach can be criticised from a historical point of view, because it is often based on secondary sources rather than archival material.

Other big questions remain open for scholars and students who are willing to employ this approach in the future. How to deal with the tension between structure and agency? Approaching big questions is very important, but CHA does not offer much space to the role of actors and is prevalently concerned with structural change. There are also epistemological questions regarding the tension between the contingent generalisation and the respect of the cases analysed. Almost sixty years ago, Moore (1966: XIV) described this problem with acumen:

“Nevertheless there remains a strong tension between the demands of doing justice to the explanation of a particular case and the search for generalisations, mainly because it is impossible to know just how important a particular problem may be until one has finished examining all of them”.

References to learn more about macro comparisons

1. Capoccia, Giovanni. and Kelemen, R. Daniel. 2007. **The study of critical junctures: Theory, narrative, and counterfactuals in historical institutionalism.** *World politics*, 59(3), 341-369. This article provides a complete analysis of critical junctures. Critical junctures place institutional arrangements on paths or trajectories, which are very difficult to alter.

2. Mahoney, James. and Thelen, Kathleen. (Eds.). 2015. **Advances in Comparative-Historical Analysis.** Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. This edited book covers multiple uses of comparative historical analysis in political science. It includes contributions from leading authors in the field and discusses the broad agenda of CHA through an analysis of fundamental works, the tools for temporal analysis (such as path dependence and critical junctures), and important methodological developments.

3. Moore, Barrington. jr. 1966. **Social origins of democracy and dictatorship: Boston: Beacon. Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World.** Boston: Beacon Press. This seminal book explains the varied political roles played by the landed upper class and the peasantry in the transformation from agrarian societies to modern industrial ones. From a methodological perspective Moore highlights the strong tension between the demands of doing justice to the explanation of a particular case and the search for generalisations. A starting point for all those interested in CHA.

4. Pierson, Paul. 2004. **Politics in Time: History, Institutions, and Social Analysis.** Princeton: Princeton University Press. The book presents a detailed analysis of the importance of time to understand institutional and social change, providing a methodological backing to the classic statement that history matters. Pierson suggests using comparative historical analysis to move beyond a static view of institutional change.

5. Skocpol, Theda. 1979. **States and social revolutions: A comparative analysis of France, Russia and China.** Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. According to Skocpol, social revolutions deserve special attention because of their extraordinary significance for the history of nations and their distinctive pattern of socio-political change. What is unique to social revolutions is that basic changes in social and political structure occur together in a mutually reinforcing fashion. To analyse these important historical events Skocpol set a comparative historical analysis of France, Russia and China. This book is a reference for those who want to apply comparative historical analysis to large scale social phenomena.

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