

Rethinking comparative analysis in a post-developmental context

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Introduction

Contemporary concerns about the status of historical sociology depict it as becalmed in a sea of methodological trouble. There has been a recent stocktaking to evaluate the encounter between history and sociology (see, e.g. Taylor, 1987; Ragin, 1985; Badie, 1992; Sztompka, 1990; Abbott, 1991) particularly as it concerns the issue of causality. When Abrams (1982) argued that history and sociology shared the problem cluster of 'structuring' as a relation between action and structure in time, he emphasized the plurality of social times in causal explanation. This involves simultaneously differentiating levels or velocities of temporality and differentiating social times cognitively in subject/analyst terms. In stressing both empirical access and analytical distance explaining social change, Abrams affirmed the significance of dialogue between the cognitive fields of both subject and analyst. Thus, when he claimed: 'far from speaking for itself the reality of the past speaks only when first firmly spoken to by the historian' (Abrams, 1982, p. 332), he was proposing that we superimpose 'structure on history with a view to recovering the way history superimposes structure on us' (Abrams, 1982, p. 335).

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The comparative method has come under scrutiny precisely because its search for causal regularities has, in one way or another, not met the kind of synthesis expressed, for example, in Abrams' vision of historical sociology. Badie, for instance, identifies in this issue of the *ISSJ* a key problem in the contradiction between differential time-scales of different cultures and the linear conception of time in the developmentalist assumptions that inform comparative historical sociology (1992). Abbott considers the multi-level temporality of particular contexts to give meaning to events, such that there is 'no abstracting "causes" out of their narrative environments; the notion of analytically similar causes producing different results . . . is a mirage' (1991, p. 228). And Sztompka identifies the problem of incommensurability in both societal and sociological discourse as the major flaw in (formal) comparative inquiry, wondering if trans-societal as well as trans-theoretical meanings are available (1990, p. 50).

In the spirit of this stock-taking, I wish to develop yet another line of inquiry, to follow Abrams' suggestion that historical sociology cannot avoid being governed by 'presentist' concerns, expressed in the conception of structure that the analyst brings to his or her investigation. My argument is that the comparative

method flourished in the post-Second World War period: a period characterized by the theory and practice of 'developmentalism'. As this paradigm has eroded, under the combined forces of transformation of the world order and theoretical challenges to 'developmentalism', the certainty and legitimacy of the comparative method have declined.

The current world order is characterized by a contradictory unity of globalization trends, on the one hand, and disintegrating and/or pluralist trends, on the other. Globalization expresses itself conceptually in world-systems theory (Wallerstein, 1990) and practically in calls for greater 'international competency' in tertiary education, via internationalized curricula (Tiryakian, 1990). The apparent counter-trend of localism expresses itself in anti-developmental discourse, such as 'participatory action research' (Fals Borda, 1990), and in trends towards 'indigenization' or 'nativism' which seek to recover 'authenticity' in local cultural discourse and practice (cf. Abaza and Stauth, 1990). Somewhere in between, perhaps, lies the happy medium which rejects the ahistoricism of polarities such as globalism and localism, understanding them as mutually conditioning social fields. Sztompka has argued in fact that globalization of the social world has reversed 'the cognitive situation' from one where a century ago heterogeneity and societal isolation was the reality, producing the problem of discovering commonalities, to one where the current problem is 'the preservation of enclaves of uniqueness amid growing homogeneity and uniformity'. Cognitively, then, the emphasis in comparative inquiry is 'seeking uniqueness among uniformities, rather than uniformity among variety' (1990, p. 55).

From the perspective of a sociology of knowledge, it can be argued alternatively that global trends a century ago generated recognition of variety in a different sense. At the time social theory, informed by the emerging national movement, simultaneously classified such variety among societies of the 'perimeter' into an evolutionary continuum. And this has influenced comparative inquiry until the present period, when, to all intents and purposes, the national movement has run its course, and the discourse of developmentalism is in disarray (Booth, 1985; Hettne, 1990; Buttel and

McMichael, 1991). The national unit has become increasingly problematic in a world characterized by vast population movements which undermine the ideal of ethnic-linguistic solidarity (Hobsbawm, 1991, p. 555), vast movements of capital which erode national economic sovereignty, and the increasing salience of global institutions, all of which subvert the formal procedures of comparative-historical inquiry in so far as it takes the national unit as the analytical unit.

Situating contemporary historical sociology

Contemporary historical sociology has had two tributary streams, which are important to distinguish in understanding the current methodological problems of comparative inquiry. The first stream was that of post-war developmentalism, the second that which marked the demise of this discourse from the 1970s to the present. Each stream expressed thresholds in modern history that have informed social scientists, and each has contributed to a veritable river of comparative inquiry. However, the framing of these contributions by specific theoretical assumptions about units of comparative analysis has generated serious problems of comparability, concerning the selection of analytical units, and, accordingly, the appropriateness of variables.

In this essay I account for the convergence of historical sociology in comparative inquiry. I then consider the limits of the comparative method, arguing that its formalization produces an unwarranted separation of theory and method, expressed in unexamined assumptions about analytical units. These assumptions are compounded by the construction of variables as indicators of processes attributed to the analytical units selected. In other words, the variables (or predicates) themselves embody *a priori* assumptions in terms of their meaning and scope. I argue for a research strategy that allows a formative, rather than a structural, approach to the selection of analytical units and variables. This entails a reflexive relation between theory and method. In other words it requires the comparative method (and its units and variables)



Coal pellets being sold at market, Chongqing, province of Sichuan, China, 1986. J.M Charles/Rapho

to be reintegrated with, and subordinated to, historical inquiry itself.

The separation of theory and method arose in part because in each form of comparative-historical sociology the global configuration was taken as a historical given, rather than as a historical moment. The first threshold for comparative-historical sociology was the profoundly different trajectories taken by nation-states in the inter-war period. The developmentalist paradigm understood this as deviation from the Anglo-American path. Alternatively, Polanyi (1957)¹ argued that the 'great transformation' involved a differential response to the collapse of the liberal world system of states established under the *Pax Britannica* via the gold standard. National protectionism, informed by distinctly different configurations of social and political forces within metropolitan states, took varying forms of national socialism, communism and social welfarism. This disturbing crystallization of authoritarian political regimes arrayed against Anglo-American social democracy led sociologists to explore the social origins of such regime variation (see Moore, 1967; Bendix, 1969; Lipset, 1967). The method employed was comparative, perhaps reaching its apogee in Moore's *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy*. Unlike Polanyi, who situated this varied process of transformation within a world-historical context (Goldfrank, 1990), Moore chose to identify difference with the distinct domestic trajectories of states selected for their relative size. As other commentators have noted (Skocpol, 1973; Johnson, 1980) the limits of this approach were that Moore's variable selection and conclusions suffered from the two assumptions of case independence and an implicit modelling of the English path to modernity. This expressed the evolutionary assumptions underlying the discourse of 'developmentalism'.

The second tributary stream appeared in the crisis of developmentalism, associated with the erosion of the Western world order established under the hegemony of the US and the singular ideologies of the Cold War. In the post-war world, 'development' or modernization was depicted in a set of evolutionary universals in which the implicit model of modernity was the United States, or more specifically, the 'pattern variables' (Parsons, 1973) that evoked the principles of US society. As that model lost legit-

imacy, with the decline of US economic power (the dollar as international reserve currency) and political power (the Indo-Chinese conflict), the era of 'post-developmentalism' began. It had two strands: conceptions of 'underdevelopment' where states mediated global politico-economic relations; and state-centred historical sociology eschewing evolutionism. In each case, the reformulations began with critiques of the singular, Western conception of modernization, but ended with a new form of an old problem: that of the reification of structure. This resulted from the attempt to surpass the diffuse, almost stateless, conceptual apparatus of evolutionary theories and to assert the centrality of the state in the historical process (e.g. Wallerstein, 1974a; Skocpol, 1979).

The common feature of these historical sociologies was their convergence in comparative analysis. For cross-national comparison, national units of analysis were considered self-evident and independent with respect to state development strategy, but sufficiently similar to justify analysis of comparative variables. For the global perspective, the unit of analysis was an unequal world economy of relationally-defined states in which these relations were systemic constants. Dependency analysts implicitly compared peripheral 'underdevelopment' with metropolitan 'development', where the latter was an unexamined model (see Warren, 1980; Phillips, 1977). World-system analysts employed comparison illustratively to confirm the universality and inequality of the singular world division of labour. In sum, across both streams of the new historical sociology, the units of comparative analysis were *a priori* constructs, and variables were considered to be universal in scope and applicability. The deductivism across this variety of perspectives is striking, and it is this use of universals that is putting historical sociology to the test.

The construction and deployment of universals in comparative inquiry is problematic precisely because universalist thinking is currently in question. This appears quite paradoxical in view of the growing salience of global forces. Globalism may bind societies together along many dimensions, but simultaneously it throws into sharp relief cultural diversity (Smith, 1990), from which stem the movements that would challenge the hegemonism of Western universals

(Robertson and Lechner, 1985).² Globalism is not a linear trend by any means, and the apparent exhaustion of Western developmentalist models (including Eastern European forms of socialist developmentalism) is matched by the emergence of alternative religious, political, and ethno-national movements on the one hand (e.g. Skocpol, 1982; Touraine, 1988; Amin et al., 1990), and a rhetorical, Western-led revival of the fiction of the self-regulating market, on the other (Bienefeld, 1989). While the latter may have universal pretensions, it is being met by resistance across the world: from family farmers in Europe and East Asia, through Latin American urban dwellers (Walton, 1984), to African peasants who are conducting a silent withdrawal from the state and its IMF-directed developmentalism (Cheru, 1990). It is precisely in this contentious global crucible that the current delegitimization of global categories arises.

Such categories abstract from the salience of local politico-cultural responses to global processes, leaving the latter unmediated. In the following pages, I argue that historical sociology needs to be more reflective about the origins and use of the comparative method, especially in the present era of globalism. Accordingly, I consider the limits of formal comparative inquiry, and offer an alternative form of comparative inquiry that attempts to take account of globally situated, but locally processed, social forces.³

The method of historical sociology

Historical sociology is not solely comparative (see e.g. Abrams, 1982). Nevertheless, there is a strong presumption that the legitimacy of historical analysis as part of a sociological inquiry depends upon a comparative perspective.⁴ Arguably, this presumption has two main sources. First, there is the position adopted by, among others, Skocpol: that among the three research strategies in historical sociology – theory testing, interpretation, and explaining causal patterns – the latter offers the most rigorous, comparative-analytic, method (1984, p. 376). Her elaboration of this method employs certain logical strategies deriving from J. S. Mill that approach the rigour of statistical or variable-

based inquiry: '(t)he investigator's commitment is not to any existing theory or theories, but to the discovery of concrete causal configurations adequate to account for important historical patterns' (Skocpol, 1984, p. 375). The basic underlying assumption is that interpreting observational data is fraught with sufficient difficulty that '(u)sually a *tertium comparationis* is desirable in deciding whether observations at specific times and places have importance' (Scheuch, 1990, p. 19).

The comparative-analytic approach emerged in the wake of developmentalism, when the premium was on overcoming excessive evolutionism, giving greater currency to meta-theoretical sociological concepts, and settling into a more appropriate post-developmental form of inquiry that nevertheless claimed analytic rigour paralleling that attributed to natural science (cf. Abbott, 1991). The explicit and rigorous union of a longer-standing practice of comparative (political) research (cf. Scheuch, 1990) with historical inquiry purportedly enhanced the legitimacy of historical sociology, as liberal and Marxist developmentalism and functionalism waned. Nevertheless, the rigorous embrace of comparative inquiry inherited its epistemological baggage, concerning societal differentiation: the other legitimating operation.

Second, there is the question of establishing comparability by selecting an appropriate analytical unit. In comparative inquiry, theory and concepts can only be 'generalized', and rendered invariant, by juxtaposing two or more 'particular' units understood as configurational 'cases' (Ragin and Zaret, 1983, p. 744). National societies were assumed to be self-contained systems with common ontogenetic patterns. Indeed it was precisely this property of national societies that connected them conceptually with evolutionary theory (Bock, 1956, p. 90). Here, the 'national society' emerged historically as a comparative construct, distinguished categorically from traditional societies, and configuratively from its modern neighbours, along an evolutionary path. In relation to this Nisbet observed: 'Fundamental to the Comparative Method and its assumed validity as a body of evidence are the very preconceptions – conclusions, too, actually – of the theory of social evolution that the Comparative Method purportedly verifies' (1969, p. 190). Thus, in the

formalization of the comparative method was embedded the ideal concept of evolving national societies, each independently replicating a common systemic process, and collectively confirming the uniformity of these units of comparison (cf. Zelditch, 1973, p. 262).

What better vehicle of comparison was there than the national society? There were in the post-war world several national societies; formally, national sovereignty was affirmed in the growing membership of the UN; and world-economic institutional imperatives, such as the aid regime (see Wood, 1986), compelled states to conform to certain common goals and operating principles. In practice, then, there was reason to identify the nation-state as a frame of comparative reference. Indeed, this conceptualization of the national society also governed development theory, which is an intellectual cousin of historical sociology, in the terms of the sociology of knowledge. Just as comparative sociology tends to identify the nation-state as the unit of comparison, so development theorists and policy-makers also tend to identify the nation-state as the unit of development (cf. Buttel and McMichael, 1991).

While the national society was identified as a product of social evolution, and therefore as a comparative construct informing modernization theory, its salience was affirmed institutionally in the post-war world as development theory adopted 'national development' as its desired outcome. Under the prevailing gold standard, this required a stable national trade account to maintain low interest rates and therefore a favourable environment for capital (see Phillips, 1977). Stable trade in turn depended on national success in the world market. Thus the ideal conditions for 'development' were those elaborated in the nation-state within the framework of the state system. Whereas Polanyi's account (1957) of the organization of the monetary basis of the state system presaged this inter-national configuration, Keynes provided a theory of national regulation for managing this problem. In principle, viable capitalist development (or indeed socialist development, under the circumstances) depended ultimately on the nation-state.

The extension of the state system through the post-war decolonization movement, and under the institutional conditions of the Bretton

Woods system (where the US dollar was the international reserve currency), was the vehicle through which real, and ideal, prescriptions for national development proliferated (see Friedmann and McMichael, 1989). This combination of national and international regulation characterizes what Ruggie has termed 'embedded liberalism', where 'multilateralism would be predicted upon domestic interventionism' (1982, p. 393) to support sectoral constituencies of the national polity (such as farmers, labour, key industries, etc.). Thus national organization of the economy and society was the bedrock concept of the post-war era. And it is not surprising that the comparative method expressed this ideal.

The consequence of adopting the comparative method for historical sociology are both theoretical and epistemological. Theoretically, the correspondence between the formal requirements of the comparative method for uniform and independent cases and the construct 'national society', has delimited the range of observable social processes to national arenas. Alternatively, it misconstrues observed processes as national in origin and consequence. That is, the method, with its assumption of the 'nationality' of 'cases', drives theoretical inquiry. Thus Skocpol's comparative study of France, Russia and China (1979) classifies social revolutions by isolating their common configurative pattern, and treating these three states as relatively independent⁵ cases with common conditions and destinies. Whereas a study of these revolutions not proceeding within the parameters of a comparative national study might interpret them as instances of a cumulative world-historical process manifested in national settings, Skocpol's study is constrained to focus on a more limited, and ideal-typical, generalization of the conditions for the emergence of the prototypical modern bureaucratic state. From my own point of view, this circumscribes social theory by imposing a national construction upon processes that might better be situated within an inter-national setting. This does not mean that the nation-state is unimportant, but rather that it is a historically contingent construct, and therefore a great deal more fluid and contextualized than is allowed by the formal assumptions of the comparative method.



Registering to vote, USA. W Limot/Rapho

Epistemologically, this method, which assumes a relative uniformity of cases, is led to abstract events and their 'variables' from their place and time settings for the sake of comparative generalization. This reformulates Badie's (1992) sense of the problem of verification (i.e. what is to be compared, and with what conceptual device that might avoid reducing fundamental difference to a common variable?). The flaw in the comparative method is not that it cannot verify, or satisfactorily justify, its comparative dimensions (Moore's 'commercial impulse' being perhaps the most infamous example of the common, global variable). More precisely, the comparative method, by definition, *rules out* the possibility of recognizing local specificity, because procedurally it subordinates cases to the condition examined, leading to the abstraction of both cases and conditions.⁶ Accordingly, it precludes examining local interpretations of, or responses to, processes that are common precisely because they are global. They may be universal processes (within the terms of reference of the study) but they are realized or expressed distinctly within local settings. As Hopkins has written:

To focus on certain seemingly similar conditions in various places at various times; to abstract those conditions from their place-time settings; and to inquire, abstractly, into the causes or consequences of the conditions is to proceed precisely in the one way clearly ruled out of the court by the ... world-historical perspective on social change. (1978, p. 212)

The problem of verification is not simply fraught with relativism, it is also one that could be resolved by resorting to an alternative form of comparative inquiry. In such an inquiry, national society is not the analytical point of departure, even though it may be a unit of observation of social processes that transcend national boundaries. Given contemporary global realities, the ability to understand 'national society' as an ongoing historical entity, rather than a natural end (or arrival) in social evolution, is at a premium. An appropriate comparative method would therefore not assume its unit of analysis *a priori*, and would attempt to situate social processes (including state formation) within a broader historical movement or conjuncture.

Incorporated comparison

I have argued above that a more satisfactory comparative analysis would reintegrate theory and method in a reflexive manner. This means that comparison would be an inseparable part of the selection of the object of inquiry. It would not *follow* such selection as a separate methodological tool, geared to identifying invariance in configurations of causal variables. This is how the formal quasi-experimental method operates, where the units compared are assumed to be relatively unrelated in time and space and yet to replicate some universal process, such as 'national development'. It assumes, *a priori*, the boundaries, and contours of social change.

Alternatively, if we believe that social change at the national level has diverse and non-replicable forms, either because nation-states emerged historically and relationally, or because of the growing (sense of) diversity among contemporary nation-states (see, e.g. Harris, 1987), then we need a different order of comparative analysis. In the case of diverse national trajectories, where the units of comparison are neither separate nor uniform, comparative strategy must address both the uneven (global) contexts and the distinct (local) compositions of nation-states. Neither can be assumed to be constant and uniform, and both are interrelated. In short, comparison must be deployed to illuminate historical processes that both generate, and account for, diversity.

One attempt to overcome the pitfalls of formal national comparative analysis is world-system theory, which explicitly challenges the goal of comparative generalization: 'It is the *a priori* elimination of each cases's distinctiveness that the world-system's approach rules out, not the claim that there are comparabilities or similarities' (Hopkins, 1979, p. 213). This theory, which perhaps was the most influential challenger to the discourse of developmentalism,⁷ sets out to relate general processes and historically particular outcomes theoretically (Hopkins and Wallerstein, 1981). Here, the modern world system pivots on an antinomy between a single world economy (with an axial division of labour) and a multiplicity of states, structured according to their position in the global hierarchy of commodity-producing labour (Wallerstein, 1974b).

Individual states form within the expansive and competitive dynamic of the world economy (e.g. colonial and post-colonial state-formation occurred within the context of metropolitan competition over markets and resources). The competitive logic of the hierarchical division of labour, by definition, rules out replication of a common process of (national) development across individual states; they are not comparable units as such. They are, however, comparable as *systemic* units, since they embody the systemic dynamic of hierarchical competition; they can be compared as members of systemic zones (core, periphery, semi-periphery), and as manifestations of systemic processes.

However, this new dimension of comparability, while allowing differentiation among states and disallowing assumptions of replicability, substitutes one *a priori* unit of analysis with another. The 'world-system' replaces the nation-state, and diversity among states conforms to systemic requirements. The functional behaviour of the individual parts essentially demonstrates (and can do little more than demonstrate) the existence of 'the system' (Bonnell, 1980, p. 165). Tilly terms this strategy 'encompassing comparison', where comparisons 'select locations within [a large] structure or process and explain similarities or differences among those locations as consequences of their relationships to the whole' (1984, p. 123). To adopt this strategy is to proceed with the 'world-system' as an uncontested unit of analysis, whose origins remain entirely ambiguous (cf. Brenner, 1977). On the one hand, the 'capitalist world-economy' is an ideal-type constructed to distinguish the modern world-system from prior world empires (Wallerstein, 1974a). On the other hand the capitalist world-economy is understood as a historical system (Wallerstein, 1974b, 1983) 'whose future is inscribed in its conception' (Howe and Sica, 1980, p. 255). This means that the unit of analysis is simultaneously assumed to be a historical given, at least for the era within which social theory emerges. The theory of social change embodied in the world-system perspective therefore repeats the deductivism of developmentalism by *presuming* a whole. Analogously, the comparative strategy remains one-sided, this time geared to generalization about systemic (rather than national) social processes.

My resolution to this problem is to deploy comparison in such a way as to avoid reifying either national or global units (see McMichael, 1990). Just as world-system theory employs a preconceived whole, so formal comparative-analytic procedures presuppose 'cases as wholes, and they compare whole cases with each other' (Ragin, 1987, p. 3). This common procedure removes the unit of analysis from theoretical contention, thereby limiting the scope and possibilities of historical explanation. Such comparative inquiry produces an 'external' relationship between unit case(s) and theory, where the whole is historically abstract (whether a constant world-system configuration, or decontextualized nation-states). In an alternative method, comparison becomes the substance, rather than the framework, of inquiry. In other words, it is *incorporated* into the very definition of the research problem. And this is accomplished reflexively, such that the instances compared are integral, individually and interactionally, to the understanding of the historical process under examination; they are not simple case vessels of a 'condition'.

There are two requirements to this method: first, ensuring that the units of analysis are historical, and therefore fluid, concepts; and second, employing an *emergent*, rather than an *a priori*, whole,⁸ to establish historical context. The units of analysis, deployed comparatively, are the elements of this conceptual procedure. They are neither subordinated 'parts' in a preconceived 'whole', nor are they independent entities. They express, constitute and modify the whole, which emerged in and through the parts, without privileging either. In this operation, totality is a conceptual *procedure*, rather than a conceptual *premise*, precisely because the conceptualization of the instances or units compared is relational.

The relational aspect of the units of analysis in 'incorporated comparison' can be understood in both time and/or space terms. While time and place are integral to all incorporated comparison, it can be analytically subdivided in these terms, so that we can describe a diachronic form, and a synchronic form. The *diachronic* form involves comparison across time of multiple instances of a single historical process. For example, states could be compared as members of a continuously evolving configuration of the

state system in and across time. Walton's comparative study of revolution exemplifies this, where he reconceives national revolts (the Huks in the Philippines, the Kenyan Mau Mau, and Colombia's La Violencia) as 'integral parts of continuous struggles that began to take on definable features at the turn of the century (and definite ones by the 1920s) in response to the socioeconomic inequalities and dislocations produced by the incorporation of local and largely precapitalist societies into the global economy' (1984, p. 169). In this comparative procedure the selection of 'place' and 'world time' – their content, and interaction – varies among analysts. Compare, for example, Roxborough's conception of 'the bourgeois revolution' as 'a continuous process in [dependent] Latin America' (1979, p. 147) but varying in content and completion in individual states, with Bendix's (1978) conception of 'citizenship' as a cumulative, world-historical event diffused across individual cultures juxtaposed in time. In each case, the predicate ('bourgeois revolution', 'citizenship') is realized as a national variant of an international process.

The *synchronic* form of 'incorporated comparison' involves comparison across space within a single world-historical conjuncture. Here, for example, states could be compared as differentiated units within a competitive global conjuncture, where variation is in and across space on the one hand, and embedded in the distinct histories of the states, on the other. It is essentially a 'cross-sectional' comparison of segments of a contradictory whole, in which the segments (belief systems, economic sectors, political units) embody distinct and overlapping 'social times'.⁹ The segments are comparable because they are brought into relation through some competitive, or contentious, common process, whether it be economic, political or cultural/normative. That is, the conjuncture is defined as a juxtaposition of historically distinct segments, such as the contradictory encounter between peasant and market economies, slave and wage labour systems, metropolitan and colonial cultures. Tomich's (1990) account of plantation slavery in the French colony of Martinique exemplifies this strategy. Deploying the metaphor of a set of Russian dolls, Tomich's multilayered analysis demonstrates how the slave relation itself was both the product of the nine-

teenth-century world economy based in metropolitan wage labour, and structured around the rivalry between British and French colonialism. In turn, the slave relation entered into the determination of the outcome of this conflict. As he claims: 'The history of slavery in Martinique can thereby be understood not merely as 'local particularism' but as part of the global processes of capitalist development. This approach reveals the world-historical character of local processes while giving specific historical content to the concept of world economy through the concrete analysis of particular phenomena' (Tomich, 1990, p. 6). Thus, the comparison of these connected segments reveals the contradictory dynamics (along part/part and part/whole dimensions) that give historical texture and interpretation to them and to the whole.¹⁰

While the diachronic form of 'incorporated comparison' has a generalizing thrust (the era), and the synchronic form has a particularizing thrust (the conjuncture), this does not exclude the possibility of creative combinations of both of these methodological strategies. For example, Polanyi, in *The Great Transformation* (1957) incorporates comparison in both forms in developing his critique of the ideology of economic liberalism. Here the nineteenth century is characterized *conjuncturally* as an attempt to institutionalize the contradictory ideal of 'the self-regulating market', counterposing the international market economy to local labour markets and economic sectors (like farming). Simultaneously, an *epochal* comparison of the utilitarian conception of 'economy' with a substantivist (pre-capitalist) conception frames his critique and his explanation of the growth of opposition to unregulated markets.

Hierarchical Structure and Social Values by Williams (1990), considers the construction of race/ethnic relations within the United States from an original world-historical context and also employs both forms of 'incorporated comparison'. He juxtaposes the entry of African and Irish labourers to the US as a comparison of two distinct processes defined in world-system time and space terms. The historical conjunctures of African and Irish 'entry' embodied quite distinct global relations and labour needs within the US. Thus Williams organizes the study substantively around two particular coercive

'moments' during the formation of the world economy (combining the generation of the West African slave trade and the dispossession of Irish peasants with periods of US development defined by slave- and wage-labour requirements). The thrust of the analysis reveals that the historic 'positioning' of African-Americans and Irish-Americans within the US political economy was based in a singular social process, but with different conjunctural political outcomes (e.g. privileging the Irish-American) related to the different time/space patterning. Williams concludes that the current understanding of race/ethnic relations in the US, to the extent that it reifies physical and intrinsic cultural dimensions, obliterates these socio-historical processes. The combination of coercive moments within an evolving world-economy culminating in a racially/ethnically stratified society decisively illustrates the utility of combining both strategies of comparison.

These studies illustrate the different ways in which 'incorporated comparison' can be employed, subordinating comparative analysis to the examination of a substantive historical problem. At this point comparison is no longer an 'external' (formal) feature of the research design for an inquiry. Rather, it has been incorporated as an 'internal' conceptual strategy relating apparently separate processes (in time and/or space) as components of a connective, world-historical process.¹¹ At the same time, the external relation between theory and method is eliminated as the analyst forgoes the generalization that juxtaposes cases deployed (abstractly) as self-evident units of comparison.

Conclusion

I have argued that the shortcomings of comparative-historical sociology stem from the unexamined assumptions of the comparative method itself. These are twofold: first, that it presumes *a priori* analytical units; and the second, that its main expression, in cross-national comparative inquiry, separates theory from method. Both of these assumptions endanger historical research, since they impose uniform and/or generalized and deductive schemas on historical processes. Social categories, including analytical units, are historically fluid in form and content. Therefore

they constitute an integral part of the inquiry itself – that is, they are neither self-evident, nor are they independent, or replicable, 'variables'. My argument is that the 'experimental' tendencies in comparative inquiry were supported by an easy identification in the post-war world of the national society as the site, source and object of social change. Such 'developmentalism' situated the Anglo-American model of capitalist democracy comparatively in the vanguard of an evolutionary continuum, informing the theory and practice of development in this era.

Accordingly, as the developmentalist paradigm has eroded, macro-comparative inquiry itself has been challenged. Questions about the appropriateness of the comparative method have emerged (Wallerstein, 1974a; Hopkins, 1978; Walton, 1984; Taylor, 1987; Burawoy, 1989; McMichael, 1990; Badie, 1992) along with questions about the appropriate dimensions of social change and the evolutionism (and Eurocentrism) of the development paradigm. Both implicitly and explicitly comparative inquiry has undergone scrutiny from several quarters. First, the national society's assumed autonomy was questioned (for Third World states in particular) in dependency theory; second, world-system theory posited the idea that all states are sub-units of a broader, historical system; more recently, the collapse of Cold War verities and the disintegration of (unified conceptions of) the Third World have focused attention on the quite diverse and non-replicable politico-economic trajectories of contemporary states; and finally the nation-state is understood to be losing salience as the site of issues related to sovereignty (see, e.g., Held, 1991), and as the key institutional form of economic regulation (see, e.g., Wood, 1986; Cox, 1987; McMichael and Myhre, 1991; Friedmann, 1991).

At the same time as the adequacy of the nation-state as an *a priori* unit of analysis has been called into question, the cross-national application of global categories has come under critical scrutiny. Both the methodological procedures derived from the evolutionary assumptions of developmentalism, and the legitimacy of that paradigm are at issue. Consequently, it is not surprising that there are serious questions emerging about the epistemological status of the formal comparative method employed by historical sociologists. This does not, however,

mean that we embrace diversity and idiography for its own sake. Rather, we should address diversity, deploying comparison reflexively to situate diversity precisely in the encounter of global and local forces. The goal is to understand how global processes are interpreted, expressed, and realized locally. In turn, this allows an even more concrete (de-reified) and open-ended under-

standing of global processes. The point is to avoid both abstract individuality and abstract generality. The mutual conditioning of the local and the global makes each more historically concrete. Arguably it can be achieved best by comprehending the unity in diversity through comparative analysis that is formative, rather than formal, in its application to historical inquiry.

Notes

1. Polanyi actually turns this fixation on the Anglo-American model on its head, by suggesting that the attempt to institutionalize globally the (English) ideal of the 'self-regulating market' resulted in a severe reaction to this model (and its limits) in late industrializing countries.

2. Here I would note the 'kenbei' trend in Japan: the Director General of Cultural Affairs at the Japanese Foreign Ministry recently claimed that the Japanese feel 'a vaguely unsettling sensation' when they are asked by Americans to fight and die for such concepts as 'freedom, democracy and the market economy', claiming that these values have no Japanese roots and feel like 'a new suit of Western clothes' to most Japanese (reported in the *New York Times*, 16 October, 1991).

3. I acknowledge that since comparison requires some common referents, there are social contexts that do not (easily) fall within these referents (see, e.g. Shanin, 1988). I would maintain, however, that the subordination of comparison to historical inquiry has a greater likelihood of addressing these 'marginal' contexts than formal comparison which tends to marginalize precisely by imposing universal categories on the variable processes examined.

4. It is interesting to note that the Section of the American Sociological Association to which those who conduct research in historical sociology belong, is called 'Comparative & Historical Sociology'. In the 1990 Newsletter (2:1) there was an unresolved debate about the 'complex tensions' inherent in this choice of hybrid methodology'

5. I say 'relatively independent' because Skocpol does build into her study the notion of 'transnational contexts', conceived as 'modernization pressures' (1979, p. 286), impinging upon the three state organizations, but which I believe remain historically rather abstract – especially insofar as there is no substantive and cumulative connective dimension across these 'transnational contexts'

6. Hopkins captures this procedure well, where he writes: '... almost without thinking about it, (the analyst) inverts the subject and the predicate: one moves from this "case" exhibiting this "condition" to this "condition" having a "case" as an instance. Now, in so moving, one has "abstracted" the condition and made it, in its now categorical form, the focus of attention and inquiry' (1979, p. 211–2).

7. Wallerstein's critique of developmentalism began with the state/society distinction emerging

in Enlightenment thought. He argued that this antimony, in presuming the legitimacy of existing states, logically presumed the existence of 'societies' matching (albeit imperfectly) these states. This had two philosophical consequences: the notion of 'universalization', which presumed the parallelism of all 'societies' (either as similar [generalization], or as distinct [idiographic] entities) and 'sectorialization', which subdivided the social sciences into disciplines reinforcing developmentalist epistemology. This obtained concrete expression in the formulation of a liberal historiography during the *Pax Britannica*, which has structured social thought ever since: 'the most profound legacy left us by this group of thinkers is their reading of modern history. The questions they felt called on to explain were (1) Britain's "lead" over France, (2) Britain's and France's "lead" over Germany and Italy, and (3) the West's "lead" over the East. The basic answer to question one was "the industrial revolution," to question two "the bourgeois revolution," and to question three the institutionalization of individual freedom' (Wallerstein, 1984, p. 109).

8. The idea of an emergent or 'self-forming whole' refers to the dialectical conception of totality in which 'the parts not only

internally interact and interconnect both among themselves and with the whole, but also that the whole cannot be petrified in an abstraction superior to the facts, because precisely in the interaction of its parts does the whole form itself as a whole' (Kosik, 1976, p. 23).

9. I have attempted this kind of comparative exercise in studies of nineteenth-century agro-export sectors in Australia (wool) and the Southern United States (cotton) where the mid-century political struggles over landed relations in each case expressed conflict between mercantilist forces stemming from the colonial system, and liberal forces identifying with the post-colonial culture of industrial capitalism, marking a profound shift in the organization and dynamics of the world economy at the time (McMichael, 1984, 1991).

10. Another example of this strategy is the work of Cardoso and Faletto on 'dependency', where the concept itself obtains coherence (unity in diversity as a global condition) through historical comparison. They insist that there is 'little sense in attempting to measure "degrees of dependency", making formal comparisons of dependent situations' (Cardoso and Faletto, 1979, p. xii).

11. The notion of developing an 'internal relation between theory and history', which underlies the epistemological thrust of this article, refers to the conceptualization of history from the formative relations among the observed social facts. It is a dialectical procedure where 'logical investigation indicates where historical investigation begins, and that in turn complements and presupposes the

logical' (Kosik, 1976, p. 29). This distinguishes the method of investigation and the method of exposition, in which 'that with which science initiates its exposition is already the result of research' (Kosik, 1976, p. 16), that is, the theoretical processing of data deriving from phenomena recognized to be dynamically interrelated. Theory is a process of abstraction in which the analyst moves back and forth between parts and whole, developing the complexity and form of their interrelations, and in so doing concretizing them both. Thus, an 'historical fact is in a sense not only the prerequisite for investigation but is also its result' (Kosik, 1976, p. 25). Through conceptualization, facts become historically concrete by locating them in a complex and dynamic context.

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