

The Distinctiveness of Comparative Social Science

“Thinking without comparison is unthinkable. And, in the absence of comparison, so is all scientific thought and scientific research” (Swanson 1971 : 145). Most social scientists today would agree with this observation, although some might be tempted to substitute the phrase *variables and relationships* for the word *comparison*. Virtually all empirical social research involves comparison of some sort. Researchers compare cases to each other; they use statistical methods to construct (and adjust) quantitative comparisons; they compare cases to theoretically derived pure cases; and they compare cases’ values on relevant variables to average values in order to assess covariation. Comparison provides a basis for making statements about empirical regularities and for evaluating and interpreting cases relative to substantive and theoretical criteria. In this broad sense, comparison is central to empirical social science as it is practiced today. Lieberman (1985 : 44) states simply that social research, “in one form or other, is *comparative* research.”

While virtually all social scientific methods are comparative in this broad sense, in social science the term *comparative method* typically is used in a narrow sense to refer to a specific kind of comparison—the comparison of large macrosocial units. In fact, the comparative method traditionally has been treated as the core method of comparative social science, the branch of social science concerned with cross-societal differences and similarities (Easthope 1974). Despite this tradition, there is substantial disagreement today concerning the distinctiveness of comparative social science in general

and the comparative method in particular. Several comparativists have objected to the idea that comparative social science is distinctive in any important respects from social science in general (Grimshaw 1973 : 18).

Smelser (1976 : 2–3), for example, claims that comparative social scientific inquiry is not a “species of inquiry independent from the remainder of social scientific inquiry” and that “the analysis of phenomena in evidently dissimilar units (especially different societies or cultures) should have no methodological problem unique to itself.” According to Smelser (1976 : 5), this continuity between comparative and noncomparative work exists because their respective goals are identical—to explain social phenomena by establishing controls over the conditions and causes of variation. (See also Armer 1973 : 50.) Any technique that furthers the goal of explaining variation, according to this reasoning, is a comparative method. This includes virtually all analytic methods used by social scientists (see Bailey 1982).

This position, that there is nothing truly distinctive about comparative social science and that virtually all social scientific methods are comparative methods, is sound, and it is attractive because it suggests that social science subdisciplines are united by their methods. The argument is favored by many comparativists, in fact, because the emphasis on continuities between comparative and noncomparative work supports the idea that comparative social science is as scientific as its siblings. This position overlooks the fact, however, that there are important differences between the *orientations* of most comparativists and most noncomparativists and these differences have important methodological consequences. While it is true that the logic of social science is continuous from one subdiscipline to another, the peculiarities of comparative social science make it an ideal setting for an examination of key issues in methodology. In fact, I argue that a lot can be gained from exaggerating the distinctive aspects of comparative work and that these lessons can be applied to other social science subdisciplines as well.

The most distinctive aspect of comparative social science is the wide gulf between qualitative and quantitative work. It is wider in comparative social science than in perhaps any other social science subdiscipline. In part this is because its qualitative tradition is dominant, the opposite of the situation in most other fields. Over the last twenty years, some of the most celebrated works in the social sciences (from Moore’s *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy* to Wallerstein’s *Modern World System*) have come out of this tradition, making it appear continuous with the grand theorizing of such classical scholars as Durkheim and Weber.

More fundamental to the gulf, however, is the fact that several other divisions coincide with the qualitative/quantitative split in comparative social science and reinforce it. Qualitative researchers tend to look at cases as wholes, and they compare whole cases with each other. While cases may be analyzed in terms of variables (for example, the presence or absence of a certain institution might be an important variable), cases are viewed as configurations—as combinations of characteristics. Comparison in the qualitative tradition thus involves comparing configurations. This holism contradicts the radically analytic approach of most quantitative work.

Not only is the qualitative tradition oriented toward cases as wholes, as configurations, but it also tends to be historically interpretive. The term *interpretive* is used in a restricted sense here. Often, the term is used to describe a type of social science that is only remotely empirical and concerned primarily with problems of meaning or hermeneutics. In this book, interpretive work is treated as a type of empirical social science: historically oriented interpretive work attempts to account for specific historical outcomes or sets of comparable outcomes or processes chosen for study because of their significance for current institutional arrangements or for social life in general. Typically, such work seeks to make sense out of different cases by piecing evidence together in a manner sensitive to chronology and by offering limited historical generalizations that are both objectively possible and cognizant of enabling conditions and limiting means—of context. This definition of interpretive work leans heavily on Weber (1949, 1975, 1977) but makes more allowance for the possibility of historical generalization based on examination of comparable cases. In this chapter I discuss these distinctive characteristics and sketch the implications of these features for comparative methodology. I begin by delineating the field.

THE BOUNDARIES AND GOALS OF COMPARATIVE SOCIAL SCIENCE

There have been several attempts to delineate the boundaries of comparative social science. Yet, there is still little agreement today concerning its domain. Most attempts to delineate the field have emphasized its special data or its special types of data. For reasons detailed below, this is a poor starting point. I argue that comparative social science is better defined by its distinctive goals.

It is common to define comparative research as research that uses compa-

able data from at least two societies. This definition emphasizes the fact that the data of comparative social science are cross-societal. (See Andreski 1965 : 66; Armer 1973 : 49.) While this is an acceptable working definition of comparative social science, most comparativists would find this definition too restrictive. It excludes, for example, comparatively oriented case studies. Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* is excluded, as is Durkheim's *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*. Many area specialists are thoroughly comparative because they implicitly compare their chosen case to their own country or to an imaginary but theoretically decisive ideal-typic case. Thus, to define comparative social science in terms of its special data is a misleadingly concrete way to delineate its boundaries.

Others have attempted to differentiate comparative social science by emphasizing its multilevel character (as in Rokkan 1966 : 19–20). According to Przeworski and Teune (1970 : 50–51), comparative work proceeds at two levels simultaneously—at the level of systems (or macrosocial level) and at the within-system level. According to their argument, any analysis that is based only on macrosocial similarities and differences is not truly comparative, even if this analysis includes an examination of aggregations of within-system characteristics. For example, if an investigator uses system-level variables (such as GNP per capita) to explain variation in a dependent variable based on aggregations of individual-level data within each system (such as literacy rates), the study would not qualify as a comparative study according to Przeworski and Teune. Ideally, system-level variables should be used to explain variation across systems in within-system relationships.

Alford's (1963) study of international variation in class voting qualifies as a comparative study by these criteria because he uses system-level variables (degree of industrialization and urbanization) to explain differences among countries in within-system relationships (the strength of the relationship between social class and party support). Walton's (1984) study of national revolts in the Third World also conforms to this definition of comparative work. He uses degree of incorporation into the world economy, a system-level variable, to account for variation in the degree to which popular protests and state reactions to protest contributed to the coalescence of revolutionary situations in six countries (see especially Walton 1984 : 188–197). Few studies traditionally thought of as comparative, however, conform to these strictures. Comparatively oriented case studies are excluded, as are quantitative cross-national studies that use only aggregate, national-level data. (Note that quantitative cross-national studies focus directly on cross-

societal similarities and differences.) Przeworski and Teune's definition of comparative inquiry as multilevel research is much more restrictive than even the first definition considered here.

Both definitions are inadequate. Yet they suggest a tentative solution to the problem of delineating comparative work. One level that invariably plays a big part in definitions of comparative work is the macrosocial level. It appears in the first definition offered above in its emphasis on data from two societies and in the second's emphasis on multilevel analyses, with one level the macrosocial. The boundaries of comparative social science, therefore, must be coterminous with a specific usage of macrosocial units.

It is not as a data category that macrosocial units are important to comparativists, but as a metatheoretical category. What distinguishes comparative social science is its use of attributes of macrosocial units in explanatory statements. This special usage is intimately linked to the twin goals of comparative social science—both to explain and to interpret macrosocial variation.

The importance of macrosocial units to explanation in comparative social science is best understood by example. Consider an investigation which concludes that a strong relationship between social class and party preference exists in Great Britain because "Great Britain is an industrial society." This conclusion concretizes the term *society* by providing an example (Great Britain) and by implying that there are other societies, some of which are industrial and some of which are not. If the investigator had concluded instead that the relationship exists because "citizens vote their pocketbooks" or because "the relations of production shape political consciousness," then he or she would have avoided concretizing any macrosocial unit and thereby would have avoided engaging in comparative social science.

This direct, empirical implementation of abstract, macrosocial units is a metatheoretical act, and it separates comparativists from noncomparativists. In order to compare societies or any other macrosocial unit, the comparativist must identify them by name. The comparativist thus assumes, at least implicitly, that macrosocial units are real and then defines them, sometimes by default, in the course of research. The fact that the difference between comparativists and noncomparativists is a metatheoretical difference based on the special goals of comparative social science has been obscured by the tendency of all social scientists to claim that they study societies or that social science is the study of society. For the noncomparativists, however, macrosocial units tend to remain abstractions. Noncomparativists can assure

themselves that the patterns and processes they study exist in a society; the concept need not be operationalized explicitly. For the comparativists, however, macrosocial units impinge on their work in a fundamental manner.

Rarely are these large, encompassing units defined. (Parsons 1977 and Marsh 1967 are exceptions.) In his discussion of the distinctiveness of comparative work, for example, Grimshaw (1973 : 4) states, "I will defer discussion of what constitutes a [macrosocial] system." This reluctance is not uncommon; most comparativists are more interested in making comparisons than in defining the objects of their comparisons (see Andreski 1965 : 66). The fact remains, however, that comparativists compare macrosocial units; they must be operationalized in the course of comparative work.

At a very general level, comparativists are interested in identifying the similarities and differences among macrosocial units. This knowledge provides the key to understanding, explaining, and interpreting diverse historical outcomes and processes and their significance for current institutional arrangements. Cross-societal similarities and differences for many social scientists constitute the most significant feature of the social landscape, and, consequently, these researchers have an unmistakable preference for explanations that cite macrosocial phenomena. This tendency is reinforced by the fact that the goals of comparative social scientists typically extend beyond an interest in simply cataloging and explaining cross-societal similarities and differences. Most comparativists, especially those who are qualitatively oriented, also seek to interpret specific experiences and trajectories of specific countries (or categories of countries). That is, they are interested in the cases themselves, their different historical experiences in particular, not simply in relations between variables characterizing broad categories of cases. This interest reinforces the tendency to use macrosocial attributes in explanatory statements.

The decision to study macrosocial variation and to use explanatory statements citing macrosocial properties is, of course, a conscious choice, shaped in large part by the enduring reality of countries, nations, states, and other large (and imposing) political entities. As long as social scientists continue to be influenced by their social and historical contexts and continue to try to interpret them, they will use macrosocial attributes in their explanations of social phenomena. It is possible to imagine a social science devoid of explanatory statements citing macrosocial phenomena. A totally psychologized social science, for example, might attempt to disavow such explanations. It is unlikely, however, that social scientists will lose interest in interpreting na-

tional and international events and processes and thereby divorce themselves from significant features of their social contexts. (In any event, to do so would be to deny the social origins and bases of social science.) Thus, macrosocial units are central to the practice of comparative social science because they are an essential ingredient of the explanations comparativists offer.

A NOTE OF CAUTION ON UNITS OF ANALYSIS

It would be wrong at this point to conclude simply that comparativists differ from noncomparativists in their "chosen unit of analysis." The example supplied previously suggests that any data unit can be used in comparative research. All that matters is how the results of research are understood. The fact that the explanations of comparative social science tend to be cross-societal and cite macrosocial phenomena, however, implies that the question of units is relevant.

Very little continuity exists, however, in discussions of units of analysis offered by comparatively oriented social scientists. An important source of this lack of continuity is the simple fact that the term *unit of analysis* is used to describe two very distinct metatheoretical constructs. Sometimes unit of analysis is used in reference to data categories. In a quantitative cross-national study of economic dependency and economic development, for example, an investigator might state that the unit of analysis is the nation-state because the data are collected at that level. At other times, however, the term *unit of analysis* is used in reference to theoretical categories. Wiener (1976), for example, in a review of Barrington Moore's *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy* (1966), states that Moore's unit of analysis is "class." Wallerstein (1974, 1979, 1980, 1984) argues in various works that there is only one valid unit of analysis in comparative social science: the "world system." Upon closer examination, however, one finds that Moore's cases are different countries and Wallerstein's discussion of the modern world system is rife with references to nation-states and comparisons of, for example, core countries and peripheral countries.

The fact that the term *unit of analysis* has been used in reference to both data categories and theoretical categories has created a great deal of confusion in the field of comparative social science. Some followers of Wallerstein, for example, have attacked those who use the nation-state as a unit of analysis in the data category sense, arguing that this practice violates world-systems theory and results in meaningless tests of its propositions. (See, for

example, Bach 1977.) Other researchers have attempted to use the modern world system as a unit of analysis in the data category sense and have examined cycles and trends in the world economy as a whole. (See, for example, Bergesen 1980 and McGowan 1985.) It is clear from Wallerstein's discussion and from his actual analyses of the world system, however, that his argument is that the world system is the only valid explanatory unit, not the only valid data unit.

This tension between the two meanings of unit of analysis has bedeviled the comparative social science literature at least since the early 1960s. Issues associated with the aggregation problem have compounded the terminological difficulties and confusion. Allardt (1966 : 339–341), for example, attempted to draw a distinction between "data units" and "analytical units," arguing that the latter are more theoretically relevant. In a similar vein, Scheuch (1966 : 164) argued that comparativists should distinguish between "units of observation" (see also Walton 1973 : 176) and "units of inference." In an early attempt to formulate a methodological position, Hopkins and Wallerstein (1970 : 183) contrasted "research sites" and "theoretical units." Several researchers attempted to clarify the situation by limiting their comments to "units of comparison" (Eisenstadt 1966 : 86; Etzioni and Dubow 1970 : 7; Czudnowski 1976 : 27). Finally, Przeworski and Teune (1970 : 8, 49–50) attempted to distinguish between "levels of observation" and "levels of analysis."

Most of these discussions were stimulated by the ambiguity associated with the term *unit of analysis*. For most noncomparative social scientists, the term presents no special problems. Their analyses and their explanations typically proceed at one level, the individual or organizational level. This is rarely the case in comparative social science, where the analysis often proceeds at one level (perhaps the individual level, as in the preceding example) and the explanation is couched at another level (usually the macro-social level). Of course, this duality exists in other types of social science, and the methodological issues raised here apply to these areas as well. The duality is most pronounced, however, in comparative social science, which is one of the features that makes it an ideal arena for methodological discussion.

To clarify the unit of analysis question in comparative social science, it is necessary to distinguish between observational units and explanatory units. This distinction follows my discussion concerning the two meanings of unit of analysis—as a data category and as a theoretical category. *Observational*

unit refers to the unit used in data collection and data analysis; *explanatory unit* refers to the unit that is used to account for the pattern of results obtained. In the class voting example mentioned above, the observational unit is the individual (the relationship is based on individual-level data) and the explanatory unit is societal.

METHODOLOGICAL CONSEQUENCES

The explanation that there is a strong relationship between social class and party preference in a sample of British voters because "Great Britain is an industrial society" implies that societies can be identified, that they can be classified as either industrial or not industrial, and that in industrial societies there is a strong relationship between social class and party preference, while in nonindustrial societies there is no such relationship. Because societies are (at least apparently) identifiable, an investigator conceivably could draw up a list of them, classify them as industrial and not industrial (or at least measure the degree to which each society is industrial), and then examine the degree to which the more industrial societies agree in manifesting a consistent relationship between social class and party choice and also the degree to which the less industrial societies agree in manifesting a weaker relationship. If these two patterns of agreement can be established, then the general statement (that in industrial societies there is a strong relationship between social class and party preference) used to explain the particular instance (the relationship observed in Great Britain) is supported.

Unfortunately, social scientific investigation is rarely this simple. There are many practical problems associated with establishing cross-societal demonstrations such as the one described above. Most of these practical problems concern the comparability of relatively dissimilar societies. This concern for comparability derives ultimately from the fact that the cases (say, countries) which comparativists study have known histories and identities. They are not anonymous, disembodied observations. In the preceding investigation, for instance, a researcher familiar with the relevant cases might have doubts about the cross-societal comparability of measures of class positions or about the identification of parties with social classes. An investigator might also have doubts about the classification of societies as industrial and not industrial or about ordinal and interval measures of degree of industrialization. These measurement problems are very important, and they have ab-

sorbed the attention of comparative social scientists for some time. In fact, many discussions of comparative methods have concerned these issues almost exclusively.

At a more basic level, it is difficult to evaluate explanatory statements of comparative social science because the number of relevant units available for such assessments is often limited by empirical constraints. Even the investigator who claims that he or she is interested in all societies, and defines societies as all contemporary nation-states, encounters serious statistical problems if a quantitative analysis of these cases is attempted. A seemingly large set of more than one hundred nation-states can be reduced by half if there are problems with missing data. Often, the remaining cases are not representative of the original hundred-plus nation-states, much less of all societies (or all macrosocial systems). This problem is apparent in the hypothetical research described above. There are many societies, both industrial and nonindustrial, that are not democratic. Thus, any attempt to assess the strength of the relationship between social class and party preference in these countries would be questionable, if not misguided. Furthermore, the definition of democratic society is problematic and ideologically charged.

Theoretical strictures also may reduce the number of relevant cases. In the hypothetical analysis of more and less industrial societies discussed above, for example, it is possible that the general statement (that social class shapes party preference only in industrial societies) is theoretically meaningful only when applied to democratic countries with a feudal past. If this were the case, then the investigator would first draw up a list of democracies with a feudal past and then distinguish between more and less industrial countries within this set. Generally speaking, the greater the theoretical or empirical specificity, the smaller the number of cases relevant to the investigation. The smaller the number of relevant cases, the greater the likelihood that the investigator will find it difficult to evaluate an explanatory statement in a way that conforms to the standards of mainstream social science, especially its quantitative branch.

Sometimes there are more explanations of a certain phenomenon than there are examples of it because these strictures reduce the number of relevant cases to a mere handful. In such investigations it is impossible to adjudicate among competing explanations. In the language of the statistical method, the use of societies in explanatory statements often presents serious degrees-of-freedom problems, for the number of relevant explanatory variables may far exceed the number of cases. From the perspective of main-

stream social science, therefore, comparative social science is severely deficient in the opportunities it presents for testing theory.

But many comparativists, especially those who are qualitatively oriented, are not often involved in "testing" theories per se. Rather, they *apply* theory to cases in order to interpret them. Because the explanatory statements of comparative social science cite attributes of macrosocial units, objects with known identities and histories figure prominently in the conduct of inquiry. Thus, it is very difficult to treat these units simply as the undifferentiated raw material of empirical social science. There is an ever present pressure to take into account and to explain the particularity of specific cases, which in turn requires the use of case-oriented methods sensitive to time, place, agency, and process.

Recall also that one of the distinctive goals of comparative social science is to interpret significant historical outcomes. From the perspective of mainstream social science this goal imposes very restrictive boundaries on social research, dramatically reducing the number of relevant observations. In essence, when a comparativist interprets significant historical outcomes, he or she selects extreme values on a more general dependent variable (for instance, social revolution is an extreme value on a general measure of social turmoil) and studies the cases with these extreme values exclusively. This practice is justified by the qualitative break that exists between extreme values and lesser values on what might be viewed by some as a continuum and also by the cultural importance and historical significance of these extreme cases. Thus, the problem of having too few societies on which to test theory is compounded by the fact that the interests and goals of comparative social science (and scientists) often dictate the design of studies with a small number of cases—too few to permit the application of any technique of statistical comparison.

Most comparativists, in fact, are interested in questions that are limited, substantively and historically. The questions they ask usually are much more circumscribed than the abstract research question posed above concerning the effect of industrialization on the strength of the relationship between social class and party preference. In the typical comparative study, only a small set of cases may provide the basis for empirical generalization. Instances of social revolution, at least as defined by Skocpol (1979), for example, are few. There are also only a few instances of successful anti-neocolonial revolt. There are more cases of dependent industrial development in the Third World today, but not so many that they can be studied

easily with quantitative cross-national techniques. Yet these and related topics demand the attention of comparative social scientists. The fact that there are few relevant instances of each phenomenon and that these instances have known identities and histories (that is, known particularity) has a powerful impact on the character of the research process.

ENTER THE COMPARATIVE METHOD

As the number of relevant observations decreases, the possibility of subjecting arguments to rigorous statistical testing diminishes. Other methods must be used. Smelser (1976: 157) argues that the method of "systematic comparative illustration" (a method he portrays as a crude approximation of more sophisticated statistical methods) must be used when the number of relevant cases is small: "This method is most often required in the comparative analysis of national units or cultures." Smelser provides as one example of the method of systematic comparative illustration Tocqueville's three-way comparison of American, French, and English customs. Tocqueville argued simply that the conditions these collectivities share (such as language in the case of the English and the Americans) could not be used to explain their differences and that differences could not be used to explain similarities (Smelser 1976: 158). In general, the technique of systematic comparative illustration involves applications of Mill's (1843) method of agreement and his indirect method of difference. (These case-oriented techniques are discussed in detail in Chapter 3.)

In an earlier work, Smelser (1973) called this systematic analysis of similarities and differences the comparative method and contrasted it with the statistical method. In his more recent *Comparative Methods in the Social Sciences* (1976), however, Smelser argues that, broadly speaking, virtually all social scientific methods are comparative and that the method of systematic comparative illustration is inferior to the statistical method as a comparative method. It is inferior, according to Smelser, because it must be used when the number of relevant cases is small and the possibility of establishing systematic control over the sources of variation in social phenomena is reduced. The possibilities for social scientific generalization are reduced.

In fact, the method that Smelser calls "the method of systematic comparative illustration" is what social scientists traditionally have called the comparative method. It forms the core of the case-oriented strategy and is quite different from correlational methods which form the core of the vari-

able-oriented strategy (see Chapters 3 and 4). It is proper to call this method the comparative method because it follows directly from asking questions about empirically defined, historically concrete, large-scale social entities and processes—the kinds of questions that comparative social scientists tend to ask. Questions that necessarily lead to detailed analyses of relatively small numbers of cases are asked in other types of social science, as well, but this type of investigation is most common in comparative social science.

Once it is admitted that the comparative method derives its distinctiveness from the special goals of comparative social science and that it is most often a direct consequence of engaging in this enterprise, the special features of the comparative method can be delineated.

THE LOGIC OF THE COMPARATIVE METHOD

“It is surprising, for all that has been said about the value of comparison, that a rigorous comparative methodology has not emerged. The reason for this lack may be the great difficulties that a rigorous comparative methodology would impose” (Porter 1970: 144). Smelser might argue that a rigorous comparative method is a contradiction in terms because, by definition, the comparative method is used only when the number of relevant cases is too small to allow the investigator to establish statistical control over the conditions and causes of variation in social phenomena. While the number of cases relevant to an analysis certainly imposes constraints on rigor, often it is the combinatorial nature of the explanations of comparative social science and the holistic character of the comparative method that militate against this kind of rigor.

Most comparativists, especially those who are qualitatively oriented, are interested in specific historical sequences or outcomes and their causes across a set of similar cases. Historical outcomes often require complex, combinatorial explanations, and such explanations are very difficult to prove in a manner consistent with the norms of mainstream quantitative social science. When causal arguments are combinatorial, it is not the number of cases but their *limited variety* that imposes constraints on rigor.

When qualitatively oriented comparativists compare, they study how different conditions or causes fit together in one setting and contrast that with how they fit together in another setting (or with how they might fit together in some ideal-typic setting). That is, they tend to analyze each observational entity as an interpretable combination of parts—as a whole. Thus, the ex-

planations of comparative social science typically cite convergent causal conditions, causes that fit together or combine in a certain manner.

A simple example illustrates this practice. A comparativist might argue that social class and party preference are strongly related to each other in a sample of British voters not *simply* because Great Britain is an industrial society but also because it has a long history of class mobilization and conflict which coincided with the development of its current political system. In effect, this explanation cites three convergent conditions: (1) a history of class struggle (2) coinciding with polity maturation (3) in a country that has been industrialized for a long time. It is their combined effect that explains the enduring individual-level relationship between social class and party preference. The argument would be that this configuration of causes explains the observed association.

To evaluate this argument rigorously, it would be necessary to find instances (among democratic countries) of all the logically possible combinations of the three conditions and then to assess the relationship between social class and party preference in each combination. Each logically possible combination should be examined because the argument is that it is the coincidence of these three conditions that explains the association. If the expected relationship is obtained only when these three conditions coincide, and if all instances of such concurrence manifest the predicted relationship, then the general statement would be supported.

It would be difficult to evaluate this argument because instances of all logically possible combinations of conditions are not available. A completely rigorous assessment would require the identification of democratic countries with eight different combinations of characteristics. (There are eight different logically possible combinations of three dichotomies.) Each different combination is conceived as a different situation, a different totality, not simply as a different collection of values on three variables. Some of these combinations, however, while logically possible, do not exist. At best, the investigator would be able to examine the combinations that do exist and assess the relationship between class and party within each of these configurations.

While this simple example shows the limitations placed on the comparative method as a consequence of its holistic nature, it also illustrates key features of the method. As already noted, the comparative method attends to configurations of conditions; it is used to determine the different combinations of conditions associated with specific outcomes or processes. More-

over, the comparative method is based on "logical methods" (see Gee 1950); it uses two of Mill's methods of inductive inquiry: the method of agreement and the indirect method of difference (Mill 1843; see also Skocpol 1979: 36; Skocpol and Somers 1980; Zelditch 1971; Ragin and Zaret 1983). These methods use all available and pertinent data concerning the preconditions of a specific outcome and, by examining the similarities and differences among relevant instances, elucidate its causes.

Because the comparative method has this character, statistical criteria are less important to this approach. This means that the comparative method does not work with samples or populations but with all relevant instances of the phenomenon of interest and, further, that the explanations which result from applications of the comparative method are not conceived in probabilistic terms because every instance of a phenomenon is examined and accounted for if possible. Consequently, the comparative method is relatively insensitive to the relative frequency of different types of cases. For example, if there are many instances of a certain phenomenon and two combinations of conditions that produce it, both combinations are considered equally valid accounts of the phenomenon regardless of their relative frequency. If one is relatively infrequent, an application of the statistical method to this same set of data might obscure its existence. The comparative method would consider both configurations of conditions relevant since both result in the phenomenon of interest.

Smelser's argument implies that the comparative method is inferior to the statistical method. Is it? The comparative method is superior to the statistical method in several important respects. First, the statistical method is not combinatorial; each relevant condition typically is examined in a piecemeal manner. Thus, for example, the statistical method can answer the question: what is the effect of having a history of class struggle net of the effect of industrialization? But it is difficult to use this method to address questions concerning the consequences of different combinations of conditions (that is, to investigate situations as wholes). To investigate combinations of conditions, the user of the statistical method must examine statistical interactions. The examination of a large number of statistical interactions in variable-oriented studies is complicated by collinearity and by problems with scarce degrees of freedom, especially in comparative research where the number of relevant cases is often small. An exhaustive examination of different combinations of seven preconditions, for example, would require a statistical analysis of the effects of more than one hundred different interaction terms.

Second, applications of the comparative method produce explanations that account for every instance of a certain phenomenon. True, these explanations may contain interpretive accounts of the particularity of one or more deviating cases, but at least the comparative method automatically highlights these irregularities and requires the investigator to propose explanations of them. This concern makes the comparative method more consistent with the goal of interpreting specific cases and addressing historical specificity. This feature of the comparative method also makes it especially well suited for the task of building new theories and synthesizing existing theories.

Third, the comparative method does not require the investigator to pretend that he or she has a sample of societies drawn from a particular population so that tests of statistical significance can be used. The boundaries of a comparative examination are set by the investigator (see Walton 1973: 174–175); they are not coterminous with the boundaries of an arbitrarily defined or (more typically) undefined population of societies or points in time or events in societies.

Finally, the comparative method forces the investigator to become familiar with the cases relevant to the analysis. To make meaningful comparisons of cases as wholes, the investigator must examine each case directly and compare each case with all other relevant cases. The statistical method, by contrast, requires the investigator only to disaggregate cases into variables and then to examine relationships among variables, not to conduct a direct examination of the differences and similarities among cases considered as configurations of characteristics (that is, as meaningful wholes).

In short, the comparative method is not a bastard cousin of the statistical method. It is qualitatively different from the statistical method, and it is uniquely suited to the kinds of questions that many comparativists ask.

THE QUALITATIVE/QUANTITATIVE SPLIT IN COMPARATIVE SOCIAL SCIENCE

As outlined here, the comparative method is essentially a case-oriented strategy of comparative research (see Chapter 3). The focus is on comparing cases, and cases are examined as wholes—as combinations of characteristics (Ragin and Zaret 1983). This orientation distinguishes it from mainstream statistical methodology. Of course, not all social scientists who call themselves comparativists use the comparative method as presented in this chapter. Many use a variable-oriented strategy which conforms to the methodological norms of mainstream social science with its emphasis on variables

and their interrelationships. The usual goal of variable-oriented investigations is to produce generalizations about relationships among variables, not to understand or interpret specific historical outcomes in a small number of cases or in an empirically defined set of cases (see Chapter 4). Combined strategies also exist, but close examination usually shows that studies using combined strategies tend to fall into one of the two camps (see Chapter 5). Examples of combined strategies include variable-oriented analyses supplemented with case studies (as in Paige 1975 and Stephens 1979) and case studies reinforced with quantitative analyses (as in Shorter and Tilly 1974).

The dichotomized nature of comparative work (case-oriented comparative study versus variable-oriented analysis) makes it an ideal setting for examining methodological issues—especially the gap between qualitative and quantitative orientations and how this gap might be bridged. Comparative work is the one branch of contemporary American social science that accords high status to the qualitative analysis of a small number of cases. In comparative social science, the variable-oriented strategy poses a challenge to traditional qualitative approaches. In other social science research areas, by contrast, the opposite is true. Thus, in comparative social science there is an established case-oriented tradition that can be directly contrasted with a growing variable-oriented tradition.

In comparative social science the qualitative tradition is strong because other methodological divisions coincide with the qualitative/quantitative split. As the preceding discussion of the logic of the comparative method shows, qualitative researchers tend to ask historically and empirically defined questions and typically answer these questions historically, in terms of origins. Thus, qualitative comparative researchers are both holistic and interpretive in their approach to comparative materials.

The split between qualitative and quantitative work in comparative social science is further aggravated by the fact that all comparativists are concerned with questions of direct relevance to macrosocial units with meaningful social identities (nation-states, for example). These identities are crucial to qualitative researchers, whereas they sometimes confound the work of those who do quantitative cross-national work. (For example, Kuwait is always a troublesome outlier in studies of economic dependence and development.) This aspect of comparative social science magnifies its value as an arena for addressing methodological issues. Contrasts between research strategies are exaggerated and the (often political) implications of methodological decisions are readily apparent.

Development, for example, is an outcome that has attracted the attention

of social scientists for some time. Yet it can be defined in a variety of ways. To define it in terms of gross national product per capita makes Western Europe, the United States, and a few oil-rich countries appear to be the most developed. Defining it in terms of satisfaction of basic human needs, however, shuffles the development hierarchy and Eastern European countries occupy more of the prominent positions. Alternatively, development can be defined politically and qualitatively in terms of the emergence of a national political culture supported by a stable central government which, in turn, is acknowledged as legitimate by its subjects. This third definition reshuffles the hierarchy (Mexico, for example, is among the more advanced countries according to this definition) and suggests a complete rethinking of issues surrounding the causes of development.

Thus, methodological decisions that might seem minor in other research areas have unavoidably political implications in comparative work. These implications are especially salient to researchers who do qualitative work.

LOOKING AHEAD

Before contrasting the two major strategies of comparative research (in Chapters 3 and 4), I address the issues of heterogeneity and causal complexity, especially multiple conjunctural causation, in Chapter 2. The latter issue is important for two reasons. First, many comparativists are especially interested in historical outcomes, and their explanations often cite combinations of causal conditions. The assessment of causal complexity, therefore, is of major importance to comparative social science. Second, the two major research strategies differ dramatically in their approach to causation. In the case-oriented approach, causal complexity is easier to examine (and to assert) because usually only a small number of cases are examined. In the variable-oriented approach, by contrast, causal complexity poses difficult specification issues. Thus, the examination of causal complexity provides an important backdrop for contrasting the two major strategies.