

# *Comparative Historical Analysis in the Social Sciences*

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*Circle: Letters to Adam Michnik* (Princeton University Press, 1996). He is concluding projects on political knowledge after the period of desolation in the West from the First World War through the Second and on the role of the South in shaping decision making and the fate of ideas during the New Deal–Fair Deal era in the United States.

**James Mahoney** earned his Ph.D. in the Department of Political Science at the University of California, Berkeley, in 1997, and he now teaches in the Department of Sociology at Brown University. His doctoral dissertation was a recipient of the Gabriel Almond Prize of the American Political Science Association. This work subsequently was revised into his first book publication, *The Legacies of Liberalism: Path Dependence and Political Regimes in Central America* (The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001). Mahoney received a Career Award from the National Science Foundation to pursue his new research on long-run development and the legacy of colonialism in Spanish America.

**Paul Pierson** is Professor of Government and Senior Associate of the Center for European Studies at Harvard University. His main teaching and research interests are in the areas of comparative public policy, the contemporary politics of the welfare state, and social theory. He is the author of *Dismantling the Welfare State? The Politics of Retrenchment in Britain and the United States* (Cambridge University Press, 1994); editor of *The New Politics of the Welfare State* (Oxford University Press, 2001); and coeditor of *European Social Policy Between Fragmentation and Integration* (Brookings Institution, 1995). Professor Pierson is currently finishing a book manuscript on the temporal dimensions of social processes tentatively titled *Politics in Time: History, Institutions, and Political Analysis*.

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Association), and *Participation and Democracy East and West: Comparisons and Interpretations* (M. E. Sharpe, 1998, coedited with Marilyn Rueschemeyer and Björn Wittrock). Rueschemeyer is currently working on a monograph in social theory tentatively titled *Usable Theory: Analytic Tools for Social Research*.

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**Kathleen Thelen** teaches political science at Northwestern University. She writes on labor politics in the advanced industrial democracies and on historical institutionalism. Her books include *Union of Parts: Labor Politics in Postwar Germany* (Cornell University Press, 1991) and *Structuring Politics: Historical Institutionalism in Comparative Analysis* (Cambridge University Press, 1992, coedited with Sven Steinmo and Frank Longstreth). Recent articles have appeared in *Political Science: The State of the Discipline* (American Political Science Association) and *The Annual Review of Political Science*. Professor Thelen is currently at work on a new book, *How Institutions Evolve*, which traces the origins and evolution of vocational training systems in Germany, Great Britain, Japan, and the United States.

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## *Comparative Historical Analysis*

### ACHIEVEMENTS AND AGENDAS

James Mahoney and Dietrich Rueschemeyer

Comparative historical analysis has a long and distinguished history in the social sciences. Those whom we now regard as the founders of modern social science, from Adam Smith to Alexis de Tocqueville to Karl Marx, all pursued comparative historical analysis as a central mode of investigation. In doing so, they continued a tradition of research that had dominated social thought for centuries. Even when social science began to organize itself into separate disciplines in the early twentieth century, comparative and historical investigation maintained a leading position, figuring prominently in the research of such eminent scholars as Otto Hintze, Max Weber, and Marc Bloch. Only by the mid-twentieth century did other approaches to social knowledge partially eclipse comparative historical research, going so far as to threaten its permanent decline. After some period of neglect, however, recent decades have witnessed a dramatic reemergence of the comparative historical tradition. Although important problems of analytic procedure and methodology remain, this mode of investigation has reasserted itself at the center of today's social sciences.

The revival of comparative historical analysis shows few signs of losing momentum. In the last decade alone, dozens of major new books from this perspective have been published, including many prize-winning analyses.<sup>1</sup>

In addition to the other contributors to this volume, we received helpful comments from Julia Adams, Elisabeth S. Clemens, David Collier, Ruth Berins Collier, Jeff Goodwin, Michael Hechter, Evelyne Huber, Edgar Kiser, Matthew Lange, Lars Mjøset, Gerardo L. Munck, Ann Shola Orloff, Richard Snyder, Sidney Tarrow, Charles Tilly, David Waldner, Laurence Whitehead, and Deborah J. Yashar.

<sup>1</sup> Among the recent comparative historical books that have received prizes organized by sections and committees of the American Political Science Association, the American Sociological Association, and the Social Science History Association are the following: Amenta

These works focus on a wide range of topics, but they are united by a commitment to offering historically grounded explanations of large-scale and substantively important outcomes. Encompassed in this scholarship is a surge of new work on social provision and welfare state development in the United States and Europe<sup>2</sup> and a host of new studies that explore processes of state formation and state restructuring in the regions of Africa, Asia, East Europe, Latin America, and the Middle East as well as in the advanced capitalist countries.<sup>3</sup> In addition, the last decade has seen the publication of important comparative historical books on economic development and industrial policy,<sup>4</sup> racial and ethnic relations and national identities,<sup>5</sup> gender and women's rights,<sup>6</sup> the emergence of democratic and authoritarian national regimes,<sup>7</sup> and the causes and consequences of revolutions in both historical settings and the modern Third World.<sup>8</sup>

This record of research since the 1990s has been accompanied by an increasingly visible place for comparative historical inquiry in the institutions and organizations of the social science disciplines.<sup>9</sup> Articles on comparative historical research appear prominently in social science journals with general readerships as well as those intended for more specialized

1998; Barkey 1994; Clemens 1997; Collier and Collier 1991; Ertman 1997; Goldstone 1991; Haggard and Kaufman 1995; Hall 1986; Luebbert 1991; Markoff 1996; Marx 1998; Orren 1991; Rueschemeyer et al. 1992; Skocpol 1992; Young 1994.

<sup>2</sup> See, e.g., Amenta 1998; de Swaan 1988; Esping-Anderson 1990; Hicks 1999; Huber and Stephens 2001; Immergut 1992; Kitschelt et al. 1999; Orloff 1993; Pierson 1994; Skocpol 1992; Steinmetz 1993; Steinmo 1993.

<sup>3</sup> See, e.g., Barkey 1994; Benschel 1990; Centeno 2002; Clark 1995; Ekiert 1996; Ertman 1997; Herbst 2000; Silberman 1993; Spruyt 1994; Tilly 1990; Waldner 1999; Young 1994.

<sup>4</sup> See, e.g., Carruthers 1996; Chaudhry 1997; Dobbin 1994; Evans 1995; Hopcroft 1999; Itzigsohn 2000; Karl 1997; Roy 1997; Seidman 1994.

<sup>5</sup> See, e.g., Brubaker 1992; Calhoun 1997; Hechter 2000; Lustick 1993; Marx 1998; Stinchcombe 1995.

<sup>6</sup> See, e.g., Banaszak 1996; Charrad 2001; Htun in press; O'Connor, Orloff, and Shaver 1999.

<sup>7</sup> See, e.g., Collier 1999; Collier and Collier 1991; Downing 1992; Haggard and Kaufman 1995; Huber and Safford 1995; Linz and Stepan 1996; Luebbert 1991; Mahoney 2001; Paige 1997; Rueschemeyer et al. 1992; Wood 2000; Yashar 1997.

<sup>8</sup> See, e.g., Colburn 1994; Foran 1997; Goldstone 1991; Goodwin 2001; Kimmel 1990; Parsa 2000; Selbin 1993; Wickham-Crowley 1992.

<sup>9</sup> In sociology, comparative historical analysis is institutionalized as its own organized section (i.e., the section on comparative and historical sociology) and has strong ties to several other sections, including political sociology. In political science, comparative historical analysis is a major component of the organized sections on comparative politics, politics and history, and states, politics, and policy, as well as the Committee on Concepts and Methods. In history, this tradition is well represented by the Social Science History Association (SSHA) and in the fields of social history and economic history.

## Achievements and Agendas

audiences.<sup>10</sup> And social science faculty are now often recruited for their expertise in this mode of inquiry, while graduate students are trained to write dissertations explicitly cast as comparative historical studies.

These recent advances derived from earlier developments. By the late 1970s and early 1980s, it was already clear that comparative historical research was experiencing a revival across the social sciences. In her concluding chapter in *Vision and Method in Historical Sociology*, for example, Theda Skocpol (1984a) pointed out that this kind of research was well beyond its days as an isolated mode of analysis carried out by a few older scholars dedicated to the classical tradition. Now, almost two decades later, few observers would deny that comparative historical research is again a leading mode of analysis, widely used throughout the social sciences.

To acknowledge the important place of the comparative historical tradition is not, of course, to suggest an absence of challenging problems for researchers who work in the tradition. For one thing, difficult questions exist about the full scope of empirical issues for which comparative historical studies may be relevant. For example, whether and how studies that focus primarily on microlevel units (e.g., individuals, small groups) can be accommodated within the macro-oriented field of comparative historical analysis remains an open question. Furthermore, some macro topics – such as law and the environment – beckon to be confronted with the tools of comparative historical analysis, but they remain understudied or overlooked in the tradition.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, comparative historical scholars are engaged in not easily resolved disputes over divergent theoretical frameworks, for which the tension between structuralism and culturalism is a major example. And there are still unresolved epistemological issues that arise from the attempt to do justice to historical particularity and at the same time achieve theoretical generalization.

Despite these continuing questions, comparative historical researchers have made major progress toward addressing issues that often were not well

<sup>10</sup> U.S. journals in sociology and political science that frequently publish comparative historical studies include the *American Journal of Sociology*, *Comparative Politics*, *Comparative Social Research*, *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, *Journal of Historical Sociology*, *Political Power and Social Theory*, *Politics and Society*, *Social Science History*, *Sociological Forum*, *Studies in Comparative International Development*, *Studies in American Political Development*, *Theory and Society*, and *World Politics*. Many other excellent area studies journals also regularly publish works in this tradition.

<sup>11</sup> Some comparative historical analysts did address these questions (e.g., Berman 1983, Orren 1991), but even more work needs to be done.

treated in the past. In the area of methodology, these investigators have become highly self-conscious about research design, and the fast-growing field of comparative historical methods has become fertile ground for innovation in the modern social sciences. For example, scholars are now in the midst of exciting research on temporal processes and path dependence,<sup>12</sup> conceptual formation and measurement,<sup>13</sup> and strategies of causal inference ranging from historical narrative and process tracing to Boolean algebra and fuzzy-set analysis.<sup>14</sup> Likewise, sustained engagement with theoretical issues has led comparative historical analysts to major breakthroughs in conceptualizing the kinds of factors that drive macro processes of change. To take one prominent example, these researchers were at the forefront of the scholarly effort to rework the role of states as actors and as institutions, a development that reoriented agendas across the social sciences (including history).<sup>15</sup>

This volume seeks to assess the achievements of comparative historical research over the last thirty years, discuss persistent problems, and explore agendas for the future. In this introductory chapter, we begin that task by delineating the distinctive features of this mode of analysis. We suggest that comparative historical analysis is best considered part of a long-standing intellectual project oriented toward the explanation of substantively important outcomes. It is defined by a concern with causal analysis, an emphasis on processes over time, and the use of systematic and contextualized comparison. In offering this definition, we intentionally exclude other analytical and methodological traits that are often associated with comparative historical analysis but that we do not consider part of its core features. For example, although many comparative historical analyses offer explanations based on social and political structures and their change, the research tradition is not inherently committed to structural explanation or any other single theoretical orientation. Likewise, while most work in the field employs qualitative forms of data analysis, comparative historical analysis is not characterized by any single method of descriptive and causal inference.

<sup>12</sup> See, e.g., Abbott 1990, 1992, 1997; Aminzade 1992; Haydu 1998; Isaac 1997; Mahoney 2000; Pierson 2000a, 2000b; Sewell 1996; Thelen 1999.

<sup>13</sup> See, e.g., Collier and Adcock 1997; Collier and Levitsky 1997; Collier and Mahon 1993; Coppedge 1999; Munck and Verkuilen 2000.

<sup>14</sup> See, e.g., Collier 1993; Dion 1998; George and Bennett in press; Goldstone 1997; Griffin 1992, 1993; Katznelson 1997; Mahoney 1999 and this volume; McKeown 1999; Munck 1998; Ragin 1987, 2000; Rueschemeyer and Stephens 1997; Snyder 2001a; Stryker 1996.

<sup>15</sup> See Skocpol (1985) for an early review of this literature; more recent citations can be found in Migdal, Kohli, and Shue (1994).

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### *A Continued Focus on Big Questions*

Although the current outpouring of comparative historical studies began in the 1960s and 1970s,<sup>16</sup> the research tradition has roots that extend back much further in time. As noted initially, comparative historical analysis was the mode of analysis that defined the classics of modern social science, as exemplified by the work of its most important founders.<sup>17</sup> The use of comparative historical techniques by the founders was no accident. Those scholars followed a long-established tradition, but above all they asked questions about the basic contours and evolution of the modern world at a time when pressing issues were raised by the epochal transitions of capitalist commercialization and industrialization in Europe. They found it essential to focus on comprehensive structures and large-scale processes that provided powerful clues to the patterning of social life, both at a macroscopic level and at the level of groups and individuals. Such big processes and structures were – and still are – most appropriately studied through explicit comparisons that transcend national or regional boundaries. In addition, these fundamental processes could not – and cannot – be analyzed without recognizing the importance of temporal sequences and the unfolding of events over time. In basic ways, then, the social analysts who would later be considered the founders of the modern social sciences were unavoidably drawn to comparative historical analysis.

Contemporary researchers who choose to ask “big” questions – that is, questions about large-scale outcomes that are regarded as substantively and normatively important by both specialists and nonspecialists – are often similarly drawn to comparative historical research. As the works cited at the beginning of this essay suggest, there is an affinity between asking big questions and using comparative historical research methods, a fact that has helped to sustain a single tradition from the beginning of modern social science analysis to the present day. Today’s comparative historical researchers have renewed this tradition not by simply repeating the emphases and styles of the founders, but by addressing fresh substantive issues

<sup>16</sup> Skocpol (1984a, 1984b) reports on the renewal of comparative historical analysis during this period. Works from that era include the celebrated studies of Anderson 1974a, 1974b; Bendix 1964, 1974, 1978; Eisenstadt 1963, 1978; Lipset and Rokkan 1968; Moore 1966; Tilly 1967, 1975; and Wallerstein 1974.

<sup>17</sup> There was an earlier wave of methodological literature that focused on dissecting the logics of inquiry used by the classical theorists, much of which is cited in Skocpol (1984b, fn. 3, p. 20). More recent contributions include, among many others, Burawoy 1989, Emirbayer 1996, and Kalberg 1994.

and by marshalling novel historical evidence and new methodological tools that have become available over time. Substantive research has expanded to include the themes of our day, ranging from the fall of socialist systems and the reconstitution of welfare states in the face of globalization,<sup>18</sup> to the national and global changes set into motion by information technology and new forms of production,<sup>19</sup> to the recent successes and failures of growth in the countries of Africa, Asia, and Latin America.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, contemporary scholars continue to raise questions first addressed by the founders that remain of paramount interest today – on topics ranging anywhere from grand sociological studies of the evolution of vast societies<sup>21</sup> to the emergence and the fates of working-class movements across time<sup>22</sup> – but they do so with the aid of methodologies and analytic strategies that help sharpen specific comparisons, bring temporal considerations more systematically into play, and facilitate more rigorous forms of causal assessment.

It is of course true that not all researchers who pose big questions do so from the standpoint of comparative historical analysis.<sup>23</sup> What, then, is distinctive about this tradition's approach to studying big questions? Most basically, comparative historical researchers ask questions and formulate puzzles about specific sets of cases that exhibit sufficient similarity to be meaningfully compared with one another.<sup>24</sup> Comparative historical researchers do not typically seek universal knowledge about all instances of ahistorically constituted populations of cases. For example, Ann Shola Orloff (1993) does not ask what factors might shape the extent of social provision for the elderly across all times and places, but instead inquires about major similarities and sharp divergences in pension policy among Britain, the United States, and Canada during clearly delineated historical periods.

<sup>18</sup> See, e.g., Bunce 1999; Huber and Stephens 2001; Kitschelt 1994; Pierson 2001; Stark and Bruszt 1998.

<sup>19</sup> See, e.g., Castells 1996–8; Piore and Sabel 1984.

<sup>20</sup> See, e.g., Amsden 2001; Deyo 1987; Evans 1995; Gereffi and Wyman 1991; Haggard 1990; Migdal 1988; Pempel 1999; Senghaas 1985; Sikkink 1991; Wade 1990.

<sup>21</sup> See, e.g., Gocek 1996; Lachmann 2000; Mann 1986, 1993; Rueschemeyer 1986.

<sup>22</sup> See, e.g., Katznelson and Zolberg 1986; Kimeldorf 1988; Seidman 1994.

<sup>23</sup> For example, as we discuss later, cross-national statistical researchers or interpretive analysts may ask “big questions,” but they do not typically do so in a way that is characteristic of comparative historical research.

<sup>24</sup> See Pierson and Skocpol 2002. “Sufficient similarity” is, of course, defined by the theoretical framework. It may thus encompass cases that from a different point of view may appear to be quite dissimilar. In this sense, a focus on sufficiently similar cases in no way excludes comparisons of highly diverse contexts, including diverse contexts in which similar processes and outcomes take place.

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Gregory M. Luebbert (1991) does not attempt to identify the causes of all political-economic regimes in all regions and all eras, but instead seeks to explain the origins of liberalism, fascism, and social democracy specifically in interwar Europe. And Thomas Ertman (1997) asks not what processes have driven statebuilding throughout human history, but instead explores the specific factors that shaped the development of sharply contrasting state-regime complexes in eighteenth-century Western Christendom.

This basic strategy of focusing on important puzzles that apply to particular historical cases is not without its critics, especially among those who seek universalizing knowledge and argue that historically delimited theorizing is fraught with pitfalls. To be sure, the historically delimited questions asked by comparative historical analysts do entail some loss, or better some reduction of ambition, when measured against the goal of fully specified causal propositions that hold across all sociocultural contexts and historical periods. Yet comparative historical analysts continue to ask such questions because of the poverty of universalizing theoretical approaches and because these questions lend themselves to research with significant analytic advantages. From the perspective of the comparative historical tradition, the universalizing programs of the past and present – ranging from structural functionalism and systems theory in the 1960s and 1970s to certain strands of game theory in the 1980s and 1990s<sup>25</sup> – have tended to generate ahistorical concepts and propositions that are often too general to be usefully applied in explanation. In viewing cases and processes at a less abstract level, by contrast, comparative historical analysts are frequently able to derive lessons from past experiences that speak to the concerns of the present. Even though their insights remain grounded in the histories examined and cannot be transposed literally to other contexts, comparative historical studies can yield more meaningful advice concerning contemporary choices and possibilities than studies that aim for universal truths but cannot grasp critical historical details.

It bears emphasis, however, that even as comparative historical studies focus on questions specific to particular historical cases, their concern with explanation often leads to further investigations that go beyond the initial

<sup>25</sup> Included in this group are some of the most famous works of social science analysis of the 1950s and 1960s, such as Easton 1965; Levy 1966; Parsons 1951; and Smelser 1963. For a discussion of the limitations of this kind of work and additional citations, see Skocpol 1984a. For discussions of universalizing forms of game theory (and their alternatives) in contemporary times, see Munck 2001 and Swedberg 2001.

cases. Such efforts at generalization must always take into consideration the “scope conditions” that were used in the initial study to define homogeneous cases appropriate for comparison (i.e., cases for which one would expect a change on a given explanatory variable to have the same average net causal effect). When a particular account is extended to a new context, it will sometimes confirm the original explanation, thereby suggesting its generality and perhaps calling for a refinement in the understanding of scope conditions. More often, attempts at generalization will suggest that an explanation is contingent on complex and variable conditions – conditions that may or may not have been adequately identified in an original scope statement but that can be further specified through the new comparison. In some cases, theoretical generalization may require one to reconceptualize variables on a more abstract level (an option that may be resisted by the more historically minded researchers). But attempts at extension may also reveal that – on current theoretical understanding – the initial account simply does not fit other apparently similar cases, raising basic questions about whether the lack of fit is a product of causal heterogeneity (i.e., the inclusion of new cases that do meet the standard of unit homogeneity) or whether it represents a deficiency in the initial explanation. With all of these possibilities, the analytic orientation of comparative historical inquiry keeps the door open for an examination of the broader implications of studies that ask questions about particular historical cases.

### *The Distinctive Features of Comparative Historical Analysis*

One might be tempted to define comparative historical analysis in a very broad sense, such that the tradition encompasses any and all studies that juxtapose historical patterns across cases. Such an inclusive definition would certainly serve the purpose of illustrating the large scope of this kind of investigation.<sup>26</sup> However, we prefer to reserve the label “comparative historical analysis” for a distinctive kind of research defined by relatively specific characteristics. While not unified by one theory or one method, all work in this tradition does share a concern with causal analysis, an emphasis on processes over time, and the use of systematic and contextualized comparison. In choosing this delimitation, we distinguish comparative historical analysis

<sup>26</sup> In a radical sense, of course, all studies are invariably both historical and comparative. They are historical in that they must make reference to events and processes that happened in the past. They are comparative in that they must inevitably juxtapose two or more observations.

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from broader enterprises such as “historical sociology” and “historical institutionalism.” These related fields often share with comparative historical research the concern with addressing big questions, but they may do so in ways not fully characteristic of the studies discussed in this volume. For example, the field of historical sociology encompasses comparative historical analysis, but it also includes interpretive and postmodern works that are not part of this tradition (see later). Likewise, all comparative historical works fit comfortably within the field of historical institutionalism, but historical institutionalist works that are not explicitly engaged in systematic comparison do not fall within the field of comparative historical analysis. Hence, we choose to treat comparative historical analysis as one branch within these larger traditions. Our intention is not to stipulate artificial boundaries that prevent the exchange of ideas among scholars working in closely related fields. Rather, we merely seek to recognize a particular kind of research that is treated as its own distinctive scholarly approach by both its practitioners and its critics.

Following emergent usage in the social sciences, then, we see comparative historical analysis as embodying the three features just indicated.<sup>27</sup> First, comparative historical inquiry is fundamentally concerned with explanation and the identification of causal configurations that produce major outcomes of interest. In comparative historical studies, the causal argument is central to the analysis; thus, causal propositions are carefully selected and tested rather than introduced *ad hoc* as incidental parts of an overall narrative. As such, comparative historical analysis does not include work that explicitly rejects causal analysis or that eschews it in favor of other research goals. For example, scholarship that avoids causal analysis in favor of “interpretive” approaches aimed at uncovering the culturally situated meanings of human behavior is not the kind of research considered in this volume. Likewise, while the “area studies” program of describing historical patterns and illuminating classifications is important

<sup>27</sup> In developing this definition, we have been influenced by the discussions in Collier 1998a; Skocpol 1979, pp. 36–7; 1984a, p. 1; and Skocpol and Somers 1980, pp. 181–3. Skocpol and Somers distinguished three types of comparative history: “macrocausal analysis,” “parallel demonstration of theory,” and “contrast of contexts.” The definition we chose is very close to the first of these (i.e., macrocausal analysis). With this choice we do not, however, mean to suggest that the other two versions of comparative and historical studies are worthless. They are different in character – one more radically leaning toward theoretical generalization, the other virtually rejecting the possibility of theory – but they remain partners in scholarly dialogue.

to comparative historical analysis, these activities are not an end in their own right in the kind of scholarship considered here. Instead, we are concerned with works that attempt to locate the causes of substantively important outcomes. Within this orientation, comparative historical analysts need not embrace any single approach to causal analysis. These researchers in fact draw on a wide range of strategies of causal inference, some of which parallel the multivariate regression techniques used by quantitative researchers and some of which are distinctive to qualitative research (see Munck 1998; Mahoney 1999 and this volume; Ragin 1987, 2000). Practicing comparative historical researchers are thus eclectic in their use of methods, employing those tools that best enable them to address problems at hand.<sup>28</sup>

Second, comparative historical researchers explicitly analyze historical sequences and take seriously the unfolding of processes over time. As Paul Pierson reminds us in his essay in this volume, the events that engage comparative historical researchers – such as social revolutions, the commercialization of agriculture, or state formation – are not static occurrences taking place at a single, fixed point; rather, they are processes that unfold over time and in time (see also Abbott 1990, 1992; Aminzade 1992; Pierson 2000a, 2000b; Rueschemeyer and Stephens 1997; Tilly 1984). As a result, comparative historical analysts incorporate considerations of the temporal structure of events in their explanations. They may, for example, argue that the influence of an event is very much shaped by the duration of the event, as Ruth Berins Collier and David Collier (1991) do when they assess the effects of different “incorporation periods” in Latin America. Likewise, comparative historical researchers may treat differences in the temporal structure of events as major outcomes to be explained, as Charles Tilly (1990) does when he explores why European city-states and federations gave way to modern states at differential rates in Europe. Furthermore, because events are themselves located in time, comparative historical analysts explicitly consider the effects of the timing of events relative to one another. To explain differences in public social spending in Britain and the United States,

<sup>28</sup> This eclecticism may go beyond questions of method and involve also what Peter Hall in his essay calls “ontological” premises, presuppositions that underlie the choice of method. In our attempt to present a collective portrait of comparative historical analysis, we do not explore this – otherwise important – question about the evolution of ontology. More generally, we do not explore here the connections between comparative historical analysis and philosophical “realism,” though we believe there are substantial complementarities between the two.

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for example, Orloff and Skocpol (1984) argue that it matters a great deal whether bureaucratic reforms came before or after full democratization; similarly, Rueschemeyer (1973) suggests that contrasting features of the legal professions in Germany and the United States were powerfully shaped by the relative timing of bureaucratic rationalization of states and capitalist developments in the economy. Indeed, precisely because events are temporal processes, they may intersect with one another, and the relative timing of that intersection can be of decisive importance.

Finally, comparative historical inquiry is distinctive because its practitioners engage in systematic and contextualized comparisons of similar and contrasting cases. Systematic comparison is, of course, indispensable given the analytic interest in causal analysis. As already suggested, most comparative historical work aims for explanations of important outcomes within delimited historical contexts, usually focusing on a small number of cases. While this approach does not directly aim for universally applicable knowledge, it represents a bargain in which significant advantages are gained. Above all, the approach makes possible a dialogue between theory and evidence of an intensity that is rare in quantitative social research. By employing a small number of cases, comparative historical researchers can comfortably move back and forth between theory and history in many iterations of analysis as they formulate new concepts, discover novel explanations, and refine preexisting theoretical expectations in light of detailed case evidence.

Furthermore, because comparative historical investigators usually know each of their cases well, they can measure variables in light of the broader context of each particular case, thereby achieving a higher level of conceptual and measurement validity than is often possible when a large number of cases are selected. This close inspection of particular cases also allows researchers to explore how variables may have different causal effects across heterogeneous contexts, thereby facilitating what Richard Locke and Kathleen Thelen (1995) call “contextualized comparisons” (see also Ragin 1987, 2000). Moreover, the question of whether and to what extent different cases are independent of each other can be subjected to nuanced examination through the intensive study of cases. For example, Dietrich Rueschemeyer, John D. Stephens, and Evelyne Huber Stephens (1992, pp. 265–7) use their close analysis of the English-speaking islands of the Caribbean, as well as comparisons with other ex-colonial countries around the globe, to show that the existence of democracy in these islands was not primarily due to the influence of the “cradle of democracy,” that is, British

colonialism, but rather to the character of state–society relations and the overall balance of power within these countries.

The “cases” chosen for comparison vary a great deal. Although nation-states are still the most common units selected, researchers are increasingly exploring federal states or departments within a single country,<sup>29</sup> supranational territories or organizations that encompass multiple nation-states,<sup>30</sup> and informal subnational territories defined by various features such as type of agricultural system or degree of state penetration.<sup>31</sup> And the cases considered need not always refer to territorial boundaries. For example, research comparing social movements and large-scale contention in the comparative historical tradition defines its population in terms of socially constructed groups.<sup>32</sup> Similarly, studies that focus on a single geographic unit may treat periods of time as cases and engage in systematic comparison in this fashion (see Haydu 1998). Thus, the kinds of cases selected correspond to subject matter and problem formulation, not simply to popular geographic categories. State-defined countries are commonly selected because they are often appropriate for macrolevel research questions. This is plain in the three areas of inquiry we consider in Part I of this volume – comparative research on revolutions, social provision, and democratic and authoritarian regimes. For other questions, however, one can and often will do better with other units of comparison.<sup>33</sup>

Conceiving comparative historical analysis as defined by three specific emphases – a concern with causal analysis, the exploration of temporal processes, and the use systematic and contextualized comparison typically limited to a small number of cases – does not encompass all comparative and historical work on large social structures, cultural patterns, and processes of change. Statistical studies that analyze large numbers of countries

<sup>29</sup> See, e.g., Clemens 1997; Heller 1999; Kohli 1987; Putnam 1993; Snyder 2001b; Williams 1994.

<sup>30</sup> Included here would be the more qualitative strands of the world systems and world society research programs (see, e.g., McMichael 1985; Meyer et al. 1997; Wallerstein 1974, 1980, 1989).

<sup>31</sup> See, e.g., Hopcroft 1999; O'Donnell 1993; Paige 1975.

<sup>32</sup> Such research includes both classic studies (e.g., Tilly 1967; Tilly, Tilly, and Tilly 1975) and more recent contributions (e.g., McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001).

<sup>33</sup> Regardless of the nature and level of analysis of the cases investigated, it is worth emphasizing that comparative historical researchers do not actually compare these “whole cases” with one another. Rather, they must, of course, select specific aspects of those cases and then systematically evaluate those aspects as variables, not unlike – in this respect – quantitative researchers who work with large numbers of cases (compare to Ragin 1987, p. 52).