of differences and similarities: is the explanation of variation a limitation to (or of) comparative analysis?

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Abstract

The disciplinary focus on explanatory research designs leads researchers to concentrate on differences between political systems to maximise variation in independent and dependent variables. This causes a bias in comparative analysis towards cross-spatial differences and a neglect of similarities and change that occurs in most or all political systems invariably and simultaneously. The article identifies the main reason for this bias is the misled perception that a strong focus on explanation is necessary for a discipline to establish itself as scientific. The article debates the consequences of such a distortion towards differences in a world in which interdependence and diffusion create convergence. It thus proposes a stronger role for (1) descriptive analysis, (2) cross-temporal explanation, and (3) 'Most Different Systems Designs' as ways to address parallel change, re-establish the balance of focus between differences and similarities, and control for diffusion effects.

Keywords comparative analysis; explanation of variation; differences and similarities; MDSD; diffusion

This article addresses a simple but, I would like to submit, crucial methodological issue for the future of comparative politics, namely the bias in comparative studies towards the analysis of differences between political systems to the detriment of similarities

and commonalities. Although many definitions of comparative politics as a discipline stress the symmetry between differences *and* similarities,¹ the tendency in comparative empirical research has been to privilege the former while neglecting the latter. In fact, some

definitions openly assert the priority of differences over similarities.²

At a minimum, practitioners of comparative research should be aware of this bias. At a maximum, we should try to remove it and re-establish the balance of focus in comparative analysis between differences and similarities. Such a distortion is obviously problematic as it may lead to overlook what perhaps are the most important phenomena that we should be studying and the more interesting 'puzzles' that we should try to solve. Can we afford ignoring phenomena that do not vary across countries? Should we not rather focus precisely on those transformations that manifest themselves everywhere simultaneously? To a large extent the question this article asks is if a type of comparative politics focused on differences is adequate to understand current developments in world politics. And the tentative answer it gives is 'no': Our methods do limit our capacity to discovering broad similarities, and increasingly so in a world in which interdependence and diffusion effects (through integration and globalisation undermining the basic assumption of the independence between nation-states – that is, the basic analytical cases of comparative politics) smooth out and will possibly wipe away differences. In such a context, a discipline and method focused on differences between independent units appear out of touch with the real world.

What causes this bias? How can we explain the distortion towards variation and the corresponding neglect of similarities? There are two main 'hypotheses' that come to mind. First, objectively, it may be that the world's political systems are indeed different, diverging, and growing diverse. But do we have evidence of that? Second, subjectively, it may simply be that we as scientists privilege differences over similarities and develop methods from which this bias originates. The article addresses these two (alternative

or complementary) explanations for the bias towards differences in comparative analysis. The conclusion the article reaches is 'blasphemous' in today's disciplinary context: We need more descriptive analysis,³ we need more cross-temporal analysis and we need more 'Most Different Systems Designs' (MDSD) and less 'grounded theories' or 'Most Similar Systems Designs' (MSSD). First, only descriptive analysis can tell us whether political systems across the world are converging or diverging. Second, only longitudinal analyses can deal with broad simultaneous change. And, finally, MDSD rather than MSSD can explain common phenomena in large areas and control for diffusion effects.

Is the 'obsession' with explanation of a discipline at pain to establish itself as a science leading to a bias towards variation and to a neglect of commonality and simultaneity? The explanation of variations is our analytical tool; but what if there is no variation between cases? Should we simply ignore these phenomena? Because methods are designed to account for variation we are ill-equipped not only to explain common patterns but even merely to detect them in the first place. As a consequence we have neglected similarities.⁴ There is therefore a limitation that becomes evident in an integrating world. This does not mean that explanatory analysis should be abandoned. The simple point this article makes is that there is a trade-off: The focus on explanation has a cost and we should debate whether this cost is reasonable or if, on the contrary, it is too high.

THE ROLE OF VARIATION IN COMPARATIVE POLITICS

Explanation is the ultimate goal of all science, including political science and, in this specific case, comparative politics.⁵ Comparative politics bases its

explanatory potential on *variation*. In this regard, it shares a fundamental principle with other disciplines – whether in the natural or social sciences. Variation is at the basis of all social science methods – experimental, quasi-experimental or non-experimental – whether using qualitative or quantitative measurement. It is the common denominator in all social-scientific methods, as all presuppose variation in either or both the dependent and the (set of) independent variables. As in all sciences, we formulate hypotheses to be empirically tested about the *association* of presence or absence of phenomena (a qualitative or categorical/discrete level of measurement) or about the *co-variation* of continuous values (quantitative level of measurement).⁶ This basic principle remains the same irrespective of whether we choose statistical methods (for example correlations, regressions, analyses of variance, etc.) or what in recent decades has come to be known as ‘the’ comparative method (Qualitative Comparative Analysis) based on Mill’s first three canons and Boolean algebra. In all the methods the basic requirement is variation.⁷

As in all quasi-experimental methods the values of the variables cannot be manipulated artificially as under laboratory conditions. Variation, instead, is obtained by *selecting several cases with values that vary* in either or both the dependent and independent variables. Depending on the direction and strength of the association between operational variables (independent and dependent ones, while controlling for variables one wishes to make sure do not influence the relationship under investigation), hypotheses are confirmed or rejected. Comparative politics, too, has adopted this positivist quasi-experimental approach. Frustrated by the impossibility of artificially modifying the scores and values of variables, it has devised a method for ‘creating’ variation by looking at a

‘Comparative politics bases its explanatory potential on variation’.

variety of cases.⁸ All methods used in comparative politics – statistics and the comparative method being the main ones – are based on associations of values. Without variation, there is no empirical test of hypotheses.⁹

By no means does this article argue that this approach is wrong or superfluous. It does though submit to the general debate that it bears limitations. First, it limits our understanding of causal mechanisms in settings in which variation does not occur. In the light of progressive convergence and reduction of differences – an erosion of variation due to interdependence and globalisation – these limitations become blatant. Second, by obliging us to focus on variations (however marginal) it overlooks similarities, commonalities, constant phenomena, general shifts of change, leading to a distorted view magnifying small differences and minimising large similarities. Third, it limits our capacity to take into account processes of diffusion and contagion. The next section deals with these points.

LIMITATIONS IN COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

DIVERGENCE VERSUS CONVERGENCE

A good reason to focus on variation and consequently be able to apply quasi-experimental explanatory methods would be that, empirically, there is a great deal of variation in the real world and that differences between political systems are increasing over time. It is fully legitimate to focus on variation if properties of political systems are diverging. But is this the case?

Comparative politics has moved back and forth between positions. Before World War II it was mainly concerned with the analysis of the state and its institutions defined in a narrow sense: state powers (legislative, executive, and judiciary), civil administration, and the military. Most studies were not comparative and instead focused on the few Western countries in which such institutions first developed. 'Classical' political science before World War II concentrated on the political systems of the United States and Britain because of the belief in a fundamental convergence (through economic development and political modernisation) of all countries towards the Anglo-Saxon model.¹⁰ Up to the 1950s this literature assumed that there would be a homogenisation around the Western model and especially the variations of it that survived the challenge to democracy in the inter-war period. With this state of mind it made sense to focus on cases where legal institutions were more advanced without the need to include countries that eventually would also adopt them. To compare was 'irrelevant'.

Then, somewhat unexpectedly, comparative politics suddenly took off. This happened with the development of political science outside the West and in small countries. It became clear that convergence was not a necessary process but rather that modernisation could take different trajectories and forms. The perception of divergence (in the form of different models of development) became dominant. The rise of communist regimes in Eastern Europe and China, the breakdown of democracy in most of Europe where fascist dictatorships came to power before World War II – and in some cases lasted until the 1970s – made it clear that other types of 'political order' could exist and needed to be understood and explained (Huntington, 1968). After World War II, de-colonisation further stimulated analyses that would go beyond those of

liberal democratic institutions. New patrimonial regimes emerged in Africa and the Middle East and populist ones in Latin America. Accordingly, the language of comparative politics was adapted by making it more general. Yet even the more abstract language introduced by systemic functionalism did not prove sufficient to account for the great variety. To compare became 'impossible'.¹¹

The response has been grounded theories based on more limited but more homogeneous sets of cases. Yet even the closer analysis of, say, Europe contributed to diversity and new comparisons. From the 1960s onwards, European comparative political scientists started to question the supposed 'supremacy' – in terms of stability and efficiency – of Anglo-Saxon majoritarian democracies. Other types of democracies were not necessarily the imperfect and unstable democracies of France's Fourth Republic, Weimar Germany, or Italy. The analyses of small but wealthy, peaceful (in spite of numerous social divisions) and egalitarian countries showed that politics worked differently than in the Anglo-Saxon model.¹² These new cases – indeed 'discoveries' – showed that other forms of democracies were viable. These studies highlighted the functioning of alternative practices (namely, consociational, neo-corporatist and multi-layered) at work beyond, and sometimes independently of, formal institutions.

Where do we stand today? Signals abound pointing in opposite directions. On the one hand, trends toward convergence are very strong. The end of the Cold War and the disappearance of the leading super-power that embodied the major alternative political model, the 'Third Wave' of democratisation in Central and Eastern Europe, the pressures toward market economy coming from the intensification of world trade, the various initiatives to 'export' democracy in Africa and the Middle East,

democratic consolidation in Latin America – these are all patterns of world-wide convergence. On the other hand, there are many signals of divergence, from the renewed role that religion plays in the Muslim world, but also in the US, to forms of neo-populist ‘Bolivarian’ democracies in Latin America, differentiation at the sub-national level points to the resurgence – as a parallel process to the weakening of the Westphalian nation-state caused by supra-national integration – of new regionalist phenomena and, finally, cultural fault lines pulling the world apart while it integrates economically.

But the point here is not to decide whether convergence or divergence prevails. The point here is that we do not have an ‘empirical answer’ to this question, and that this answer cannot come from explanatory analysis. I do not wish to argue that we should drop explanatory analysis and focus on descriptions because variation in a converging world is disappearing. The problem is that we do not know if variation is disappearing across the world’s polities and that we need a stronger role for descriptive analysis to answer this question in the first place.

COMMONALITIES VERSUS DIFFERENCES

Any phenomenon – whether social or not – can be analysed at different levels of generality (think of Susan Strange’s analogy of trees and forests). But establishing what is similar and what is different is a matter of *choice*: How strong should our magnifying glasses be? How far do we wish to ‘zoom in’ on specific issues? We can look broadly across Europe and say that in a very homogeneous way mass and class politics appeared in the final decades of the nineteenth century almost simultaneously through workers’ parties. Or we can look more closely and point to the differences between levels of radicalism of workers’ movements across

countries, or differences in size and composition, whether the left was divided or not, and so on. Levels of similarity/dissimilarity depend on one’s interest and there is no objective way to establish if generality or specificity is more important.¹³

Ultimately, the balance between differences and similarities is a problem of *classification* that is common to different disciplines, from biology to the social sciences. We can analyse what is different in the social behaviour of gorillas and chimpanzees and humans, or focus on what distinguishes these three groups of apes from the social behaviour of insects (ants or bees). Robert Putnam (1993) describes differences in political culture between Italian regions, whereas Almond and Verba (1963) point to a basic Italian political culture distinguished from the civic cultures of the US and Britain. We are all familiar with criticism that comparative work receives from country specialists for disregarding internal differences.

The nineteenth century witnessed what is probably the greatest change in the political organisation of human societies, with the Industrial Revolution and the development of nation-states and mass democracy. All major macro-sociologists – from Spencer and Comte to Parsons, through Marx, Tocqueville, Tönnies and Durkheim – deal with this change that today affects the entire globe and that led to the birth of the social sciences (as well as of statistics, the ‘science of the state’). There is no previous experience of mass democracy based on principles of fundamental equality between individuals, civic liberties, political rights and open participation in the political process and social welfare.

Yet most of comparative politics focuses on the determinants of the variations between countries rather than addressing broad common developments. Paradoxically, perhaps, even the field that is more inclined to broad

comparisons – that of comparative historical sociology (or sociological institutionalism) – is primarily concerned with explaining variations between cases (countries) with respect to a general process. It is interesting to note, for example, that Rokkan (1999) does not present a theory of democratisation but rather a theory of differential timing of countries reaching various thresholds. It seems, however, that a number of developments over the last 200 years (in Europe and elsewhere) have been remarkably similar.¹⁴ Leaving aside broad commonalities of increasing life expectancy, literacy rates, and so on, we can detect several subsequent ‘waves’ of change that reached everywhere. I take examples from the field I know best:

- Dates such as 1789, 1830, 1848 mark democratic revolutions in most Western countries, when civil and political rights were extended.
- The nineteenth century witnesses also processes of state formation and nation-building (through independence, unification or breakup of empires).
- During the nineteenth century there is a basic opposition between ‘progress’ and ‘reaction’, translated in all party systems in the opposition between conservatives (Catholics) and liberals in restricted electorates. Almost simultaneously there is the wave of workers’ mobilisation through social democratic parties triggered by the extension of suffrage. This is when mass and class politics kicks in.
- We see parallel institutional changes with pioneering reforms spreading to other countries: the extension of suffrage and the introduction of proportional representation between the end of the nineteenth century and the end of World War I.
- There is the almost general breakdown of democracies in Europe between World War I and World War II.

‘Are we certain that it is cross-country differences that are the most relevant problem to analyse?’

- After World War II there is a general push towards the development of the welfare state.
- More recently, common changes include the parallel institutionalisation of ‘new politics’ and post-material movements (civil rights, feminist, ecological, pacifist) that developed out of value and generational change, and new right-wing populist parties as a response to the threats posed by supranational integration and globalisation.

Unlike historians (see Hobsbawm, 1973, 1975, 1987, 1994 as an example), comparative political scientists seem to have abandoned the ‘bird-fly’ perspective in favour of a powerful magnifying microscope highlighting small differences. Yet we risk missing out the most important problems, while comparative politics should answer questions about broad common changes. Do we address the important questions? Are we certain that it is cross-country differences that are the most relevant problem to analyse? The danger is that our approaches do not allow us to decide objectively.

What can we do about this? First, *descriptive analysis* allows us to establish the scope of similarities and differences, and whether spatial differences are larger or smaller than temporal ones. Skipping the descriptive phase to focus on explanation means *assuming* that cross-space differences are more important than similarities or cross-temporal differences. Our explanations are thus uninformed. The questions comparative politics addresses relate to the perception we have of the world. If we perceive

variation we must account for differences: Why did agrarian parties appear in some political systems and not in others? If we perceive homogeneity, however, we are in trouble: Why is left-right the main alignment everywhere? The answer to this question is often the subject of speculation. 'Assuming' means that we take variation for granted. We take for granted that variations are more important than similarities. But can we afford to guess? No, and we do have a method to assess the scope of differences against the scope of similarities. The role of description is crucial here.

Second, *cross-temporal variation* should have a stronger role. In the examples above the absence of cross-spatial variation does not mean the absence of variation altogether. With general processes of 'change' we have simultaneity, that is, values that vary over time but not across space. Time (the dimension underlying 'change') plays here a crucial role, for when we say generality we often have in mind a process with an end point towards which change is aimed. Variation, then, means differences of timing along this process. Some are more advanced than others. If we take industrialisation as an example, we see different dates (for different countries) at which the percentage of industrial active population is higher than that in agriculture. Eventually all will get there, but some earlier and some later, some faster and some slower, some before, and some after other transformations. Cases are cross-sectional; variables and values are temporal. Many phenomena are analysed in this way – more or less explicitly – with specific countries often considered the 'forerunners' or precursors.

'Change' (even broad changes everywhere) consists of variation over time, which can lead to explanatory statements. This is true also when no cross-national differences exist (i.e. there is no spatial variation). We can explain the change in the values of some phenomena

over time, through the association with values of some other phenomena across the same time units.¹⁵ Also here, however, comparative politics has privileged the spatial over the temporal dimension even in the explanation of temporal 'change' by combining cross-temporal with cross-spatial variation. In this case, too, the solution has been to focus on cross-sectional variation in the timing of events. With temporal cases the analysis focuses on the *deviations of this trend in different cross-sectional cases*. Trends are analysed in relative terms, that is, where it has occurred earlier or later, faster or slower. This entails a combination of temporal and cross-sectional variation. With this strategy, however, we give up the possibility to explain common phenomena and choose to concentrate on specific variations.

Third, *MDSD* should occupy a more prominent place. In recent decades, that is since the end of the behavioural 'golden age' of large global comparisons based on a general language, there has been a return to 'grounded theories' more limited in space. European comparative political scientists like Rokkan, Lehmbruch and others (and even more so area specialists from Eastern Europe, Latin America, Africa, Asia, the Middle East) had noted in the 1960s–1970s that the highly abstract, ahistorical categories of systemic functionalism were too removed from concrete cases. The excessive abstraction of concepts and categories in systemic functionalism was countered also by a return of attention to varying historical structures, cultural elements and geographic location, and in which the specific socio-economic context plays a central role (Thelen and Steinmo, 1992). Rather than general universalistic theories, middle-range theories came to be privileged stressing the advantages of case studies or in-depth analyses of few countries.¹⁶

This narrowing of scope entails, however, a methodological change. From a methodological point of view the counter-reaction to large-scale comparisons led to MSSD in which a number of similar factors could be considered as 'controlled for' through a *ex ante* case selection. Therefore, focusing on a restricted set of similar cases leads the design to ask questions of (often minimal) variations between them, rather than the general question common to all cases. Only the insertion of these cases in a larger comparative scheme would allow us to understand, say, an all-European development. Rokkan cannot account for a general democratisation in Europe as he has only European cases. He can 'only' account for differences within Europe. Moore (1966) or Rogowski (1989), on the other hand, by comparing European cases with non-European ones provide a design that allows the explanation of the all-European development. Bartolini (2000) focuses on variations in the size, ideology, composition, etc. of the European left. But it is only by contrasting the European case to, say, the US that we can account for the whole European development.¹⁷ Perhaps the best examples of such a MDSD remain Almond and Verba's *The Civic Culture* (1963) and Skocpol's (1979) analysis in *States and Social Revolutions*. The principle of MDSD consists of climbing to a higher level of generality and to contrast democratisation to non-democratisation or socialism to non-socialism in order to create a more general variation. This entails, however, moving away from 'grounded theories' and 'area studies' (which, incidentally, also face a higher risk of diffusion effects, as will be seen in the next section).¹⁸

INDEPENDENCE VERSUS INTERDEPENDENCE

When we speak of similarity we confront cases (political systems) with same

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scores or values according to a number of properties. In the case of convergence the similarity increases over time. The third step is to take into account the possibility that similarity and convergence are due to the influence of some cases on others, i.e. through interdependence.

Processes of diffusion and contagion that cause interdependence violate, statistically, one of the main principles of causal analysis in comparative politics, that is, the independence of cases from one another. Diffusion weakens our hope to be able to come up with explanatory generalisations. In recent years there has been a great deal of methodological progress in 'controlling for' diffusion effects. Yet the problem remains that diffusion is not only a variable in explanatory statements, but mainly a factor causing *reduced variation*.¹⁹ The question to be addressed here concerns the challenges to comparative politics coming from the growing interdependence between political systems. One of the most compelling questions for comparative politics concerns its role in a world that is increasingly interdependent.

Comparative politics was born on the methodological assumption that cases – i.e. national political systems – are independent from each other. The standard image of the sovereign nation-state is that of an entity within well-defined territorial borders: a national polity, a national economy, and a national community of citizens. On this premise, comparative researchers thought they

could safely ignore what takes place outside the borders of the countries they were studying. It is, however, increasingly difficult to maintain such a position and, indeed, the literature has addressed these issues. Accordingly, there has been a resurgence of interest in 'Galton's problem'. Francis Galton was the first (back in the nineteenth century) to point to the problem of associations between phenomena that are, in fact, the result of diffusion effects between cases rather than functional connections. He noted that many cross-sectional correlations between variables were spurious; the outcome was the artefact of the diffusion across cases rather than the product of an analytical relationship.

The assumption of independence – if at any point valid – does not hold true any longer. Most countries are today open systems increasingly subject to external influences. The risk for comparative politics is to end up with an N equal to 1. Przeworski and Teune in their classic book of 1970 on the comparative method ask: 'how many independent events can we observe? If the similarity within a group of systems is a result of diffusion, there is only one independent observation' (Przeworski and Teune, 1970: 52).²⁰ The problem obviously increases with transnationalisation processes, the amelioration of communication, spread of information, and acceleration of exchanges.²¹ In an increasingly interdependent world, comparative political scientists realise that social phenomena are not isolated and self-contained, but rather are affected by events occurring within other societies, not necessarily neighbouring countries but also from more remote locations. And, in a 'shrinking world', the problem is stronger today than in the past. Is our current methodology fit to analyse situations of dependence between cases and diffusion effects?

For some clearly not. We can only capitulate and surrender, and comparative

research should focus on enclaves of 'uniqueness' resisting globalisation (this position goes back to Sztompka, 1988). For others, on the other hand, one should not exaggerate the problem. First, some societies are more immune than others to external influences (because of selective adoption, cultural resistance, non-preparation to innovation). Second, contagion concerns some fields more than others (monetary policies are more interlinked between states than, say, their ethnic composition). Again, however, as with similarity and convergence, the issue at stake is how to assess empirically the scope of interdependence and how to deal with it methodologically. Once more descriptive analysis and MSD can play a more important role.

The first task of comparative politics is to estimate the scope of interdependence and to evaluate diffusion possibilities. Levels of interdependence can be evaluated through 'diffusion possibility matrices' that include measures of potential diffusion between societies. These measures are based on factors like language similarity and geographical proximity, but also indicators of economic dependence (such as trade composition indices). Diffusion possibility matrices provide a contextual variable to be included in explanations. This is a procedure that takes place in the descriptive phase of research although explanatory statements remain the ultimate goal. In this sense diffusion matrices are a means to a more ambitious aim. In time series analysis, for example, diffusion is a factor that can be 'modelled'. Regression models are able to incorporate across-system diffusion effects, that is, the spatial diffusion of the dependent variable from system to system. In this explanatory perspective diffusion and contagion processes are mainly seen as disturbances (statistical dependence between cases) that need to be eliminated from the models or included as independent

variables. But they may precisely be the phenomena that we should investigate: not as contextual but as dependent variables.

The second task of comparative politics is to control for diffusion effects through cross-section sampling procedures. This means to control for diffusion through case selection. One way to control for diffusion is to choose societies that are not connected to one another and where diffusion is unlikely. This is more likely to happen in MDSD. Cases are selected from different contexts in order to ensure their independence. Even if finding such cases is problematic in modern industrialised societies and in an increasingly interdependent world, it seems that, as for the explanation of parallel phenomena, MDSD provides a useful methodological tool.

THE ROLE OF DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSIS

Descriptive analysis plays a fundamental role in empirical research. In this last section, I would like to argue in favour of a stronger role for descriptive analysis, stress the advantages of this type of analysis and indicate how the neglect of descriptive analysis has led to limitations in comparative research. There are three points that deserve to be mentioned.

First, only descriptive analysis allows us to *assess the empirical balance* between similarity and dissimilarity, between convergence and divergence, and between dependence and interdependence. I have said above that the questions comparative politics addresses relate to the *perception* we have of the world. By focussing exclusively on explanatory research designs we may miss the most important. The focus on variation determined by explanatory designs leads us to overlook constant phenomena and general shifts of change. Comparative politics has been overlooking them although

'the neglect of descriptive analysis has led to limitations in comparative research'.

commonalities may be much larger in scope and thus theoretically more important than differences/variations. Descriptive analysis allows us to transform perceptions of what the world looks like into empirically informed observations.

Second, descriptive analysis allows us to *get dependent variables right*. The question here is not 'how much' variation (if any), but 'which' variation. What does the dependent variable – i.e. the phenomenon we want to explain – look like? Hypotheses are formulated depending on the type of variation we observe in the dependent variable. We formulate different hypotheses if we observe that political apathy increases or decreases over 20 years or if we saw that welfare states differ in Europe simply between North and South or between more than two groups of countries. Our hypotheses as well as our predictions rely primarily on the description of phenomena. We should not assume what the dependent variable looks like. Establishing what is to be explained takes place in the descriptive phase of research. And descriptive analysis takes place *prior to* explanatory analysis.

Third, descriptive analysis allows us to *discover phenomena*. The discovery of patterns, trends, and differences is not a matter of 'confirmatory' analysis but of exploratory analysis. Exploration is carried out through description. When we explain, on the other hand, we try to (dis)confirm hypotheses supposedly accounting for phenomena that we have already observed. Theory-driven analysis in this sense operates as a limitation to the discovery of new phenomena and may act like a corset or blinkers. When we develop theories and formulate

hypotheses (deductively) we go out in the empirical reality looking for confirmations – and we often turn a blind eye to novelties. This allows very little room for unexpected results.

The insistence on causal relationships and multi-variate analysis thus becomes a limitation. But if descriptive analysis is this important, why have we neglected it? And if explanatory analysis does indeed involve a number of limitations, why did we focus so strongly on it? The reason why comparative politics has not fully addressed the question of commonalities, similarities, and convergence, is its fixation with explanation – which requires variation. And the reason for this 'obsession' is its desire to establish itself as a scientific discipline. The misleading perception that science equates only with explanation leads to focus on variation.

The almost exclusive focus on causal explanation and thus variation rather appears as the frustration of a young, impatient discipline that wants to grow too fast. In my opinion, our discipline needs more solid empirical foundations for its further development. In this sense science should be a modest activity making progress through cumulative and collaborative activities. A developing discipline should not be ashamed of doing simple things and preparing for more sophisticated and ambitious work. Archeologists spend years digging and cleaning off dust from old bones, and climatologists spend years drilling the ice to measure volcanoes' emissions of some thousands of years ago. The message to students of comparative politics should be a similar one: go into the field and get your hand dirty. Were we more modest in our ambitions and accept that our discipline is about measurement as well as about explanation, then we would at the same time be able to confront current challenges and have a more useful discipline.

Do we thus need a 'descriptive turn'? Yes, although it should not be a U-turn. I

think it is time to debate whether or not we need a re-evaluation of the role of description to establish a balance of focus between similarity and difference. This does not mean downgrading the significance of explanation, which remains the ultimate goal of comparative politics. It means simply to upgrade the value and reward efforts in the description of the large changes that we have in front of our eyes. Such a turn calls for a promotion in status of this type of analysis and calls for acknowledgements and rewards in the profession.

CONCLUSION

What are the solutions to bring commonality more prominently into the picture? And what are the chances to address broad parallel shifts in a more rigorous scientific way? Three features of future comparative politics seem to emerge from the previous discussion:

- A stronger role of *descriptive analysis* as a way to re-establish the balance of focus between differences and similarities;
- A greater attention to *cross-temporal variation* as a way to address (also explanatorily) broad simultaneous change that does not vary cross-spatially;
- A more frequent use of *MDSD* as a way to introduce variation in broad patterns common to specific areas and as a way to control for diffusion.

To a large extent it seems to me that this implies a return to the 'golden age' of the behavioural revolution in the social sciences. First, a re-evaluation of descriptive analysis is in line with the *technological progress* of the last decade. Data from all over the world are available in machine-readable and compatible formats from the Internet. There is also a linguistic homogenisation with English establishing itself in the publication of statistics and individual survey data.²² Comparability is increased by the im-

provement of data collections by international organisations, such as the UN, ILO, IMF, the World Bank, and by the collaboration between national academic and official statistical archives. Technological progress has made the analysis of large and complex datasets easier, with a wealth of software and statistical procedures.²³ Descriptive analysis can help us to assess the real scope of differences versus similarities, to 'discover' new patterns and trends by simply looking at the data in an exploratory way and, finally, to assess the scope of diffusion patterns between countries.

Second, a deeper concern with broad patterns of change taking place simultaneously across countries is in line with the preoccupation of fundamental social and political change, similar to the preoccupation with the breakdown of democracies between the two world wars or the rise of communist regimes after World War II. All too often we tend to forget how deeply the functional-systemic framework was inspired by the necessity to include 'survival' as the single most important function of a system – whether it is biological, ecological or political. The most important function of a system is to stay alive. This paradigm emerged after the experience of the non-survival of democratic systems, and studies such as *The Civic Culture* (1963) were primarily concerned with the cultural conditions under which democratic systems survive. Similarly, studies of individual attitudes and behaviour made possible by the computer revolution in the 1960s tried to unveil general processes of change in levels and forms of political participation (Lazarsfeld, Campbell, etc.) or broad changes of values (Inglehart, 1977). Technological

and statistical progress boosts today the opportunity to address broad research questions.

Third, research designs based on the selection of MDSD take up the ambition of the behavioural age not to limit comparative analysis to area studies and niches. The focus on different systems can help us to deal with (1) broad changes in given areas that we would be unable to explain were we to include only cases of that area and (2) diffusion effects and problems of interdependence. Almond and Verba's study of five political cultures was a typical MDSD research. It was able to explain commonalities (the impact of political cultures in the breakdown of democracy in Europe) by bringing European cases into a larger set and thus introduce variation in a phenomenon that in continental Europe had been a general one with very few exceptions. This implies a move away from 'grounded theories',²⁴ as well as re-introducing a general language and comparable concepts able to travel across areas.²⁵ The improvement of data makes this possible and we can expect broader comparisons and MDSD to be one of the future characteristics of comparative politics. Comparative politics should remain – or become again – the discipline that addresses big questions.

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Notes

1 Mair defines the mission of comparative politics as 'identifying, and eventually explaining, the differences and similarities between [countries]' (Mair, 1996: 310). In the introduction to a textbook, I myself define comparative politics as a discipline interested in 'describing, explaining, and predicting [...]

differences and similarities across political systems' (Caramani, 2008: 2, see also 4–5). Similarly van Biezen and Caramani define the goal of comparative politics as 'identifying and explaining *differences and similarities* between cases' (van Biezen and Caramani, 2006: 29). All italics have been added.

2 For example, in Apter's assertion that the purpose of comparative politics is to 'determine what difference *differences* make' (Apter, 1996: 372) or in Laitin's claim that 'research in comparative politics seeks to account for the *variation* in outcomes among political units' (Laitin, 2002: 630). Again, italics added.

3 Blasphemous and, to many, derogatory. The term 'descriptive' has clearly acquired over the years a pejorative connotation. For this reason many use the term 'exploratory', which basically means the same thing but has so far remained untouched by negative associations.

4 This is not dissimilar from Shapiro's emphasis on problem-driven, as opposed to theory-or method-driven, political science (2002).

5 Building on the goal of explanation is the one of prediction. Prediction is a generalisation or extrapolation in the future of empirically tested relationships observed in the past. Explanation and prediction rest on similar principles of inference.

6 Also the search for necessary/sufficient conditions relies on associations between the values of two or more variables. It is based on the association between presence/absence of factors. In fact, Mill himself considered that all methods ultimately boil down – tellingly – to the Method of Difference.

7 On the fundamental 'unity' in the basic principles underlying different methods see Caramani (2009).

8 This is obviously true also for MSSD (Przeworski and Teune, 1970) in which one selects cases with similar values on as many properties/variables as possible but in which one tries to identify one variable in which a crucial difference associates with the difference observed in the dependent variable. De Meur and Berg-Schlusser (1994) rightly speak in these cases of 'Most Similar – Different Outcome' (MS-DO) designs.

9 The self-evident corollary of this 'methodologically-driven' focus on variation is that it requires several cases as one case only does not lead to any variation. The difficulty or impossibility of formulating explanatory statements based on one case only is well known among case study specialists, as well as among researchers dealing with phenomena in which ' $N=1$ ', such as European integration.

10 By 'classical' I mean here what Schmitter named 'Dead, White, European Men, but not Boring' (Schmitter, 1993: 173). Examples are James Bryce, Lawrence Lowell, Charles Merriam and Woodrow Wilson.

11 The methodological response given to the increased variation coming from new cases was to move up in the ladder of generalisation (Sartori, 1970). The behavioural revolution in the social sciences affected comparative politics in that the emphasis on institutions and the state was diminished to allow for their inclusion in more general and universal categories. Concepts, taken from Parsons' abstract depiction of the social system, were redefined in order to cover non-Western settings, pre-modern societies, and non-state polities.

12 See the various contributions by authors like Rokkan in Norway, Lehmbruch in Austria, Steiner in Switzerland, Lorwin in Belgium, Daalder and Lijphart in the Netherlands, many of which were included in the influential volume by Dahl (1966) *Political Oppositions in Western Democracies*.

13 This is particularly true if we debate the ultimate goal of empirical research. Insofar as it is theory development, one may argue that the more general, the better. But if the goal is immediate practical relevance, then the more specific, the better.

14 Compare the following quotation: 'Rokkan was less concerned with why the territorial state succeeded *everywhere* in replacing the other types of political system, or why cultural features became more important *everywhere* as defining characteristics of political membership, or why institutions and organisations of mass political participation emerged *everywhere*; what intrigued him was why these general processes of state formation, nation-building, and democratisation took such different forms' (Flora, 1999: 12).

15 Bartolini rightly points to the risks of historical multi-collinearity when the units of analysis are time points or periods (time series) and the variables are strongly associated with one another (Bartolini, 1993: 157–60). The relationship between variables is 'spurious' because of a general factor of temporal change. This risk is high when dealing with broad socio-economic and political variables that tend to vary in parallel over time.

16 Mair argues that the re-awakening of attention on institutions is a consequence of the narrowing of geographical scope. The general language introduced by systemic functionalism – which nearly discarded the state and its institutions – was needed to encompass a greater variety of polities. In systemic functionalism institutions were 'absorbed upward into the more abstract notions of role, structure and function' (Mair, 1996: 317).

- 17 On Werner Sombart's classical question about why there is no socialism in the US I just refer to the latest major work which is Lipset and Marks (2000).
- 18 Yet, it is not always possible to find cases to which we can contrast large areas, and thus create variation. An example is European integration (clearly an ' $N=1$ ').
- 19 Operationally, diffusion is a factor that accounts for the association between the correlated variables. Units of analysis – be it organisations or territorial units – are not isolated from one another; in temporal developments phenomena spread from one case to the other.
- 20 Such a statement is not unproblematic as $N=1$ is not the same as $N>1$ with cases sharing the same value on the dependent variable.
- 21 First, external influences act through imitation and learning from others (for example, it is plausible that the development of welfare states in various countries was affected by diffusion processes). Second, interdependence stems from exchange or coordination when units belong to overarching organisations (the European Union or the World Trade Organisation). Third, there is imposition by conquest and economic dependency. Finally, diffusion takes place through 'societal fission', or migrations and splinters from common original systems.
- 22 For example, Inglehart's 'World Values Survey'.
- 23 Remarkable progress has also been made in the field of qualitative data analysis as attested by the 'ESDS Qualidata' database at the University of Essex or the development of software for Boolean analysis such as Ragin's QCA and Cronqvist's TOSMANA.
- 24 This does not necessarily entail a move away, this time around, from institutions. In fact, with the latest 'waves of democratisation' in Europe, Latin America and parts of Asia and Africa, it seems that the 'not boring old men' were not entirely wrong in predicting a convergence towards liberal democratic institutions. Unlike the 1960s, a broadening of the scope of comparison after the Cold War does not mean a shift of focus away from institutions. Much of the new data we possess today is in fact of an institutional nature.
- 25 It should not come as a surprise that Easton's work (1965) is the last encompassing effort to formulate a general empirical theory of the political system introducing global concepts applicable irrespective of time and space. Also, it should not come as a surprise that the behavioural revolution led to the *quantification of political analysis*, in that 'numbers' are the most general language possible in a culturally diverse world.

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