

# The Utility of Comparative Area Studies for Historical Analysis

Amel Ahmed

University of Massachusetts, Amherst

While focusing on particular countries or regions is indispensable for accumulating substantive knowledge, there are also costs to not stretching beyond a given geographic region when taking on “big” questions in the study of politics. The recent volume, *Comparative Area Studies: Methodological Rationales and Cross-Regional Applications* (Ahram, Köllner, and Sil 2018) identifies comparative area studies (CAS) as a distinct research strategy occupying unique intellectual spaces within the social sciences. As the contributions to the volume demonstrate, CAS has distinct advantages for developing mid-range theory, offering novel empirical findings and a different mode of triangulation. Such works can also serve an important disciplinary function by bringing into dialogue scholars that may be siloed off into various research communities. Moreover, they advance an important intellectual agenda in offering a mode of research that problematizes and denaturalizes our conceptions of geographical areas, and indeed, our understanding of what it means to compare.

In this essay I wish to develop further a dimension of the CAS framework that is acknowledged but not adequately treated within the volume: the utility of a comparative area studies sensibility for historical analysis. The basic intuition of the CAS framework, which is to question the notion of an “area” or the assemblage of cases that constitute a theoretically relevant unit of analysis, is critically important for historical research. This is because both our conventional understandings of areas and disciplinary conventions around area studies are situated in specific cultural and historical contexts that may not translate to the period under investigation. Thus looking across areas or bringing insight gleaned from one area to bear on the study of another opens important new avenues for the study of political development.

Social scientists have for some time been admonishing us to “read history forward,” emphasizing the need to take seriously actors’ subjective understandings of their situations and the context in which they are fighting their fights (Pierson 2004; Kreuzer 2010; Capoccia and Ziblatt, 2010; Ahmed 2010). An attentiveness to subjectivity has been central to efforts to revive historical

scholarship within the social sciences and much of the focus has been on time and temporalities. This has included work on sequencing, critical junctures, and also actors’ perception of the tempo of events (Mahoney and Reuschemeyer 2003; Pierson 2000; Cappocia and Keleman 2007; Grzymala-Busse 2011).

In addition to this emphasis on time, something that is critically important for historical analysis, but less thoroughly examined, is an appreciation of subjectivity with respect to actors’ understanding of the political space in which they are operating. Geography is surely one element of this, but, just as surely, geography is not determinative of what constitutes an area or region. Indeed, many scholars have questioned not only the construction of areas and regions as political entities (Holbig 2017; Fawn 2009), but also the physical geography on which these constructions are based (Wiggen and Lewis 1997; Schulten 2001).

Geographic demarcations themselves are politically informed at the same time that they inform our politics. It is for this reason, for instance, that Haiti can be imagined as part of Africa, while Turkey remains beyond the boundaries of Europe: In 2016, the African Union (AU) considered and voted on the inclusion of Haiti in the African Union. And while the bid was ultimately unsuccessful, it exemplifies the ways in which the geographical imagination need not correspond to accepted physical boundaries. It also led to several initiatives to deepen ties between the AU and the African Diaspora, defined as “the communities throughout the world that are descended from the historic movement of peoples from Africa” (quoted in Amao 2018, 50). In contrast, negotiations for Turkey to join the European Union, which began in 2005, continued for a decade and ultimately stalled out for failure to meet the political requirements for membership (Ugur 2010).

The challenge of developing a grounded conceptualization of regions is compounded in historical research because we often bring contemporary understandings of what constitutes a theoretically significant “area” to our research about historical phenomenon. We are often deceived by what Skinner

referred to as a sense of “familiarity” when reading historical texts. On this he wrote:

It is the very impression of familiarity, however, which constitutes the added barrier to understanding. The historians of our past still tend, perhaps in consequence, to be much less aware than the social anthropologists have become about the danger that an application of familiar concepts and conventions may actually be self-defeating if the project is the understanding of the past. (Skinner 1970, 136)

Overcoming this sense of familiarity requires something akin to an ethnographic sensibility (Schatz 2009; Simmons and Smith 2017). It is telling that Skinner compared the task of a historian to that of an anthropologist. Both need to develop modes of “seeing” that are different from those used to navigate familiar contexts. Building on this, Schaffer (2016) has offered the technique of “locating” concepts as a way to disrupt familiarity across both different ages and languages (55). Locating actors’ sense of political space historically is challenging for all the reasons noted above, but central to the effort is the need to problematize the familiar in terms of our understanding of areas.

The temptation to see the familiar in the past may vary depending on the place and time. For the historical context I am most familiar with, nineteenth-century Europe, this slippage is quite easy because the political geography remains more or less unchanged. So it may be possible to imagine that the idea of Germany today is what it was then, or that the physical geographical boundaries of Europe constituted the relevant political demarcations of space. These projections of the familiar onto the past would be very problematic given that German unification did not happen until 1871 and would remain contested for decades after. In addition, Europe of the nineteenth century was understood by many to extend to colonial spaces, especially with regard to the settler colonies. But there is a danger even with historical periods and places that may seem self-evidently different. As Schaffer demonstrates, Skinner himself has been guilty of this homogenizing tendency in his discussion of “originality” in the work of Milton (Schaffer 2016, 64-67).

With respect to our conceptions of space, the challenge is often a daunting one given that specific notions of geographic areas are built into our discipline. Even with the ebb and flow of area studies as separate fields, entrenched ideas about where a given politics

begins and ends are embedded in the organization of the academy. Organization such as the Latin American Studies Association, the Council for European Studies, the Middle East Studies Association and so on, provide opportunities to continually question the construction of regions, but also serve to maintain the prevalent practices of regional delineation. This is often reinforced by disciplinary conventions and training that starts very early on. A paper that comes out of a seminar on Western Europe becomes an article or a dissertation on Western Europe. And because the decision often happens at early stages of research, it can silo off important avenues for exploration.

Approaching questions with a sensitivity to actors’ subjectivity requires that we question contemporary understandings of political geography and investigate what, for the actors in question, is the relevant sense of political space. The CAS framework moves us helpfully in this direction. With such an approach, researchers can leverage deep contextual understandings of particular locales to creatively configure research strategies that stretch beyond specific area specialties. To be sure, CAS also requires notions of areas, and those too will be constructions. This is inescapable. But in breaking out of the typical regional delineations it invites greater reflexivity with regard to the way in which areas are deployed in our research. It reminds us that the answers to our question about Europe may not be found in Europe and that we may need to look elsewhere to even understand what Europe means in that context. That reminder in itself may help to disrupt our sense of familiarity.

This is a lesson that I have learned from my own efforts to understand the origins of electoral systems in nineteenth-century democracies (Ahmed 2013). Limiting the investigation to Europe left a fragmented picture of the dynamics of electoral system choice. Widening the scope to look at the settler colonies, and especially the United States, gave new purchase on the question. The move to incorporate the US in the study was not motivated initially by methodological considerations or a deductive logic of comparison, though the case did add great leverage in these respects as well. Rather, the idea to include the US came from contextual understanding of the European cases, and especially the high frequency of correspondence among elites across the Atlantic on the topic of electoral systems. Indeed, from their correspondence it was clear that across Europe and the settler colonies, elites saw themselves as part of a common project and readily shared strategies to advance that project. While not all CAS applications proceed in

such an inductive or exploratory manner, they are rooted in a commitment to using contextual understanding to specify the appropriate boundaries of inquiry.

Adding the US to the analysis changed both the periodization of the study and the theoretical framing. The key finding in the US case, that single-member plurality (SMP) was not the originary system as was previously assumed, led me to question whether it was the starting point for other cases (Ahmed 2010). Indeed it was not. Rather, most countries, like the US, started with mixed-member plurality and the shift to SMP, like that to proportional representation (PR), was a defensive strategy of pre-democratic parties seeking to retain power. The question then became *not* “why did some countries shift to PR and other retain SMP?” but rather, “why did countries choose to move to PR or SMP, understood as alternative strategies of competition?” This shift in the framing of the research question, though subtle, was critical and theoretically transformative. The compartmentalization of American and European Political Development in our field of study had obscured critical empirical findings and theoretical insights. Moreover, it is a demarcation that makes little sense for the nineteenth century, as the settler colonies were seen very much as an extension of Europe. Even if not

politically tied, they were intellectually and epistemically inextricable. Elites regularly exchanged ideas and political strategies to contain the incoming flow of democracy, and the settler colonies, far from being remote, ignored backwaters, were viewed as laboratories for democracy, a natural experiment unfolding for the benefit of Europe’s great powers.

Given that this particular cross-regional comparison provides so much fertile ground for investigation, it is surprising that more scholars have not made use of it. With some notable exceptions (Martin and Swank 2010; Steinmo 2010; Bateman 2018), the study of American and European political development remains fairly separate in our analysis. To be sure, there are also costs to doing CAS, especially to doing it historically, as it requires deep knowledge and a serious time commitment to developing the ethnographic sensibility necessary to do it well. But, as the CAS volume shows, there are also ways to make such comparisons manageable, through carefully constructed research designs and even creatively leveraged single case studies. While certainly not all will or should take up that call, if the paradigm of CAS encourages more scholars to look past disciplinary regional divides, we will be all the richer for it.

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# Synergies of CAS: New Inquires, Theory Development, and Community

Roselyn Hsueh  
Temple University

The 2018 publication of Ariel Ahram, Patrick Köllner, and Rudra Sil’s edited volume *Comparative Areas Studies: Methodological Rationales & Cross-Regional Applications* (CAS) inspires enthusiasm from scholars of political science, such as myself, who are already engaged (with some trepidation in the age of mixed-methods and experimental research) in the enterprise of cross-regional contextualized comparisons. Reflecting on my own work, as well as other scholarship in the study of the political economy of development (PED), particularly comparative studies that engage the politics of China as a case, this essay considers how CAS encourages at least three synergies.

First, CAS identifies and motivates comparative investigations of regions and countries based on controlled empirical similarities and differences overlooked by traditional area studies research. Second, CAS facilitates the development of theories inspired by active engagement of theoretical and substantive advances in area studies. Third, CAS acknowledges existing scholarship and unites researchers engaged in cross-regional contextualized comparisons with

area studies scholars to create new inquiries and new communities.

## **New Inquiries: Nontraditional Assumptions of Similarities and Differences**

The research agenda outlined in Ahram, Köllner, and Sil (2018) promotes the conduct of investigations unencumbered by traditional assumptions of similarities and differences between cases which may no longer hold (due to changing circumstances or timing, or both) or were based on outmoded stereotypes that burden rather than enlighten. Cheng Chen’s (2018) chapter, which investigates anti-corruption campaigns in China and Russia, joins other researchers engaged in work using China as a major case, crisscrossing the traditional boundaries of area studies. In traditional area studies research, on the one hand, China is often compared to its East Asian neighbors, regardless of China’s differing level of development, timing in global economic integration, and regime type, which contrast with East Asia’s newly industrialized countries (NICs).