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

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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).

A systematic comparison of China and the NICs that seriously considers contextual factors assumed to be similar shows profound differences which lead to different outcomes. My first book (Hsueh 2011) on China's regulatory state, which I contend is part and parcel of the country's globalization strategy, incorporates case studies of Taiwan, South Korea, and Japan. Shedding light on differences between China and the NICs, Hsueh (2011) questions traditional assumptions of similarities due to ethnocentric expectations and historical associations, and engages dominant perspectives in PED about modes of global economic integration and relationship to state control. China has historical and cultural ties to its East Asian neighbors; however, the country's post-1978 global economic integration in the context of neoliberalism and post-Cold War global politics, and Japanese colonialism and the Cold War during the NICs' similar stage of development, are important contextual factors, which profoundly shape variation in the global economic integration of China and the NICs.

On the other hand, Russia is often compared with countries in post-Soviet Eurasia. In her chapter, Chen (2018) persuasively argues for comparing the "two largest post-Communist giants" (134) in new inquiries, such as the ways in which the authoritarian party-state controls corruption, where the combination of capitalism and political authoritarianism serve as controls in the research design. Chen shows that a "well-matched and context-sensitive comparison could reveal significant divergence in the elite politics and institutional capacities of these regimes that would otherwise likely be obscured by single-case studies or studies restricted to one single geographical area" (134-135). All the same, Chen acknowledges that it may not always make sense to compare China and Russia, such as when research questions "assume scope conditions found primarily in one geographic area" (134), including studies on post-communist party systems, electoral institutions, and European integration.

Comparative Area Studies thus reconciles with Tulia Falletti and Julia Lynch's (2009) contention that "if causal mechanisms are portable but context-dependent, then to develop causal theories, we must be able to identify analytically equivalent contexts as well as specify where one context ends and another begins" (1154). By carefully delineating commonalities and similarities across cases, CAS contributes to the endeavor of generalizability in theory building. The precise combination of capitalism and post-Communist authoritarianism in China and its impacts might be overlooked by situating China

only in Asia. Likewise, understanding Japan only as an Asian country might overlook how its coordinated market economy function in patterns comparable to the advanced industrialized economies of Germany and France, as Steven K. Vogel (1996) has shown.

More nuanced comparative analysis grounded in deeper substantive understanding of regions and countries empowers the analyst to uncover the actual causal mechanisms at work. Pranab Bardhan (2010)'s comparative study of China and India shows that political institutions matter for development; however, it is not regime type per se but rather accountability institutions at different levels, which shape development outcomes. Without them, authoritarianism can distort development while severe accountability failures mar democratic governance. Likewise, the comparative studies brought together by Martin Dimitrov (2013) showcase the work of respected scholars of China and Russia, including Kellee Tsai and Thomas Remington, on understanding why in the post-1991 Soviet collapse, communism endured in five countries while it fell away in ten others. They argue and show substantively that differences in institutional adaptations shape the extent and scope of communist resilience.

### **Theory Development with Deep Engagement of Cases across and within Areas**

"Contextualized comparisons steer a middle course between radical excisions of context-free large-n analysis and the thick, idiographic tendencies of area studies" (Ahram 2018, 156). The works in Ahram, Köllner, and Sil are in step with attempts to develop and evaluate theory armed with the willingness to engage in the deepening of knowledge of carefully selected country, intracountry, and cross-regional cases. Cross-regional contextualized comparisons offer the opportunity to "triangulate" data, just as mixed-methods research purports to do (Sil 2018). In his chapter, Sil contends that theories developed with within-case analysis (whether intra-country or intra-region) can be tested in another area, which triangulates as different types of data would. The merits of qualitative research and controlled comparisons are beyond the "close-up process-tracing analysis of a well-fitted case that usually confirms or illuminates a general proposition derived statistically or deductively" (227).

Cross-regional contextualized comparisons as advocated by CAS also synergize with the analytical leverage identified by Richard Locke and Kathleen Thelen (1996) in the comparison of similar political

developments in very different institutional contexts to understand their differences in extent and scope. Dan Slater and Daniel Ziblatt (2013) more recently underscore the indispensability of controlled case comparisons in generating internal and external validity in spite of political science's "multi-method turn" (3). Slater's 2005 study with Richard F. Doner and Bryan K. Ritchie, which challenges conventional wisdom about state autonomy in the developmental state, is developed with East Asian cases and further tested with their deep knowledge of cases from Southeast Asia.

The active engagement of scholarship across regional and country areas can inspire conceptual, theoretical, and substantive rigor, with methodological and theoretical implications (whether in triangulation of data, identification of causal mechanisms, or in the development of theory). CAS as a method of dynamic engagement of existing area studies scholarship can theoretically and substantively inform us about each individual case if findings are thoughtfully situated in existing debates and when scope conditions are clearly delineated, and claims are unambiguously defined.

In researching the country and sector cases of my next book, in addition to conducting in-depth fieldwork, I have delved into debates in area studies in ways that go beyond either accepting existing studies as never problematic or always biased and questionable. I have uncovered important divergences and similarities in how historical and primary records are understood. This discovery empowers me to tackle existing debates and new puzzles as a result of engaging them through the active triangulation of data, including pursuing primary documents and alternative secondary accounts. This is akin to what Ian Lustick (1996) describes as self-conscious use and Marc Trachtenberg (2009) refers to as the active approach toward encountering historiography as previously constructed narratives. I also avoid the "apolitical and ahistorical" reification of the market as a neutral and natural institution, as Kiren Chaudhry (1993, 246) has warned against. In this manner, CAS facilitates empirically grounded analysis and constructive extensions of and departures from prevailing knowledge without the unreasonable requirement to master deep knowledge of multiple countries from multiple regions.

Hsueh (2012) shows that in China and India's integration into the global economy, China and India have departed from neoliberalism, in addition to the diverging trajectories of the East Asian and Latin American NICs during a similar stage of development. Both countries have taken a "liberalization two-step," which

follows macro-liberalization with micro-level sectoral reregulation. Yet China and India have reregulated with political logics historically rooted in very different perceptions of strategic value and sectoral organization of institutions. In order to examine dominant patterns of market governance structures, I incorporate the same sectors in Russia into the comparative analysis (Hsueh, forthcoming), in addition to examining as shadow cases the same sectors in other countries of comparable size and timing in globalization.

Self-conscious engagement with existing debates in area studies has forced me to analytically clarify my independent and dependent variables, with the effects of specifying my research questions and carefully delineating my study's scope. It has helped me to elaborate on my controls, similarities experienced by my study's main countries (China, India, and Russia) and sectors (telecommunications and textiles). I am able to then negotiate agential and structural differences across and within the cases to refine and better articulate my theoretical framework. Showing that perceived strategic value operates across countries at the national level as well within country at the sectoral level maximizes the utility of analytical comparisons that Theda Skocpol and Margaret Somers (1980) identifies as "parallel demonstration of theory" and "the contrast of contexts" (175). It also reconciles with the CAS endeavor to identify and characterize generalizable political processes with regional and national variations.

## **Accumulation of Knowledge and Community Building**

The CAS research agenda explicitly advocates bringing together scholars engaged in this type of scholarship, and for them to "engage with ongoing research and scholarly discourse within area studies communities" (Ahram, Köllner, and Sil 2018, 4) because "area studies can no longer be considered outmoded" (44). The community building effort is to be commended at a time when the discipline privileges certain methods and types of research, and scholars, such as myself, feel isolated in spite of a rich body of outstanding scholarship and a thriving, growing community of likeminded academics. Already I have benefited immensely from reading the works of and then meeting the excellent scholars behind the research published in the edited volume.

In addition to exposing scholars employing cross-regional contextualized comparisons, CAS recognizes the rich body of scholarship already engaged in this enterprise. Köllner, Sil, and Ahram's (2018) introduction



to the edited volume acknowledges that CAS's "use of the comparative method to surface causal linkages portable across world regions" and to engage academic "discourse in two or more area studies communities," in addition to balancing "deep sensitivity to context," (3) is not new. Indeed, in the study of PED, Atul Kohli (2004)'s systematic comparison of colonialism and the origins of patterns of state construction and intervention in South Korea, Brazil, India, and Nigeria exemplifies the best of controlled comparisons and portable causal mechanisms and regularities.

In addition to Kohli, an expert on India, China scholar Dorothy Solinger (2009) shows how representative countries from different regions (China, France, and Mexico), to alleviate crises of capital shortage in the neoliberal era, recalibrated their revolution-inspired political compacts between labor and the state to join supranational economic organizations. Mary Gallagher (2002)'s *World Politics* article compares China to Eastern Europe (Hungary) and East Asia (South Korea and Taiwan) to problematize the relationship between economic and political reforms. Yu-Shan Wu (1995)'s book, which systematically compares China, the Soviet Union, Hungary, and Taiwan, is an earlier endeavor of area studies meet generalizable inquiries. As is that of Chalmers Johnson's 1962 book, which contrasts the communist mobilizations of China and the Soviet Union.

More recent contextualized cross-regional research includes Mark W. Frazier (2019)'s comparative historical analysis on the impacts of urban land commodification

on variation in patterns of contentious politics in Shanghai and Mumbai. Frazier's work and my next book join the growing number of systematic comparisons of China to other globalizing countries of comparable circumstances and demographics, which transcend traditional boundaries of area studies.<sup>1</sup> These latest studies demonstrate that China can be a useful case to test and inform theories in comparative politics and comparative economic development. Whether emphasizing structural endowments, domestic and global actors and institutions, or the enduring salience of ideas, these works adopt the comparative method to examine national and subnational, micro-level variations. The cross-national analysis and subnational disaggregation enable systematic investigations that otherwise would not be possible with a focus only on macro or micro-level factors that make these countries seemingly difficult to track together.

Ahram, Köllner, and Sil's research agenda, showcased by Chen's chapter and past and present studies employing cross-regional contextualized comparisons with China as a major case in the last decade, amplifies Lily Tsai's (2017) call to China scholars "to build on previous scholarship on China while working actively with non-China colleagues to identify shared questions about political phenomena that exist beyond China" (26). Doing so extends beyond ensuring "hard-won findings about China fully contribute to knowledge" (26); it actively promotes new inquiries and new communities engaged in cross-regional and interregional contextualized comparisons.

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