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Comparative Area Studies: A Route to New Insights

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Two trends stand out in contemporary political science. Some researchers are assembling ever-better global datasets (e.g., Coppedge et al. 2019), while others are conducting sophisticated experiments and other micro-level analyses within single countries (Pepinsky 2019). Alongside these trends, the 2018 volume *Comparative Area Studies: Methodological Rationales and Cross-Regional Applications* (Ahram, Köllner, and Sil) underscores the vitality of small- and medium-N case study research. Most notably, the volume advocates for cross-regional research. This symposium seeks to extend a burgeoning dialogue regarding the virtues, promises, and challenges associated with comparative area studies (Sellers 2019).

The symposium gathers six essays. Two, written by Amel Ahmed and me, are from contributors to the volume. Ahmed describes how comparative area studies can promote an ethnographic sensibility and enable researchers to better understand their historical subjects. I preview my essay in the next paragraph. The next two articles, written by Roselyn Hsueh and Nora Fisher-Onar, come from scholars whose research has affinities with comparative area studies. Hsueh documents a variety of examples of innovative research on China, which contrast the Chinese case in fresh and unusual ways. Fisher-Onar examines how comparative area studies might elucidate the emerging multipolarity in the world, by exploring how countries with imperial histories (China, Russia, Iran, and Turkey) are striving to expand their power. The final two essays, by Marissa Brookes and Thomas Pepinsky, critically appraise comparative area studies and suggest ways to sharpen it. Brookes thinks comparative area studies research could be strengthened if researchers better explicated their underlying logic of causal inference, particularly by specifying if key variables constitute, for example, an "INUS" condition. Pepinsky presses practitioners to rethink what distinguishes an "area" as such and to consider whether our geographic conceptualizations should be replaced by alternative constructs.

In this first essay, I provide an overview of comparative area studies. I describe its distinctive features, identify its affinities with causal explanation, and provide a way that one can begin comparative area studies research. I first report some key characteristics of comparative area studies: a methodological imperative for cross-regional research, a practical desire to engage area specialists, and an embrace of epistemic diversity. In the second section, I describe how comparative area studies can help researchers explain outcomes in multiple cases, rather than using case studies as tests of a broad inferential pattern. Researchers can achieve causal explanation by comparing cases to an ideal type, which encapsulates general causal claims and can thereby help researchers explain why individual cases turned out as they did. This approach renders an alternative outlook on case selection that neutralizes common methodological concerns about cross-regional comparisons. The third section offers guidance to start doing comparative area studies, specifically by synthesizing the region-specific conventional wisdoms that surround one's research question. Incidentally, for those readers who are unfamiliar with the edited volume, I want to mention that the first section is mainly a summary of comparative area studies. The second and third sections are more my personal take, and the volume's editors or contributors do not necessarily share these views.

What Comparative Area Studies Is

There are methodological, practical, and epistemic dimensions to comparative area studies. The most obvious methodological aspect is that it is cross-regional. Such research designs are uncommon: Patrick Köllner, Rudra Sil, and Ariel Ahram (2018, 17) estimate that just 15 percent of the principally small-N comparative politics books that were reviewed in *Perspectives on Politics* between 2006 and 2013 had case studies from more than one region. So one reason that comparative area studies highlights cross-regional research is because it is relatively rare, which may diminish our awareness of its virtues.

Yet a more compelling reason to promote cross-regional research is substantive. Studying a phenomenon in different regional contexts may pose vexing challenges that yield novel insights, as one struggles to make sense of the commonalities and differences within and between world regions. In addition, cross-regional research can prompt us to reconsider conventional wisdoms that have taken hold within area studies communities, as well as among area-oriented political scientists. Later, in the third section of this article, I consider how engaging these region-specific conventional wisdoms can produce new conceptual and explanatory insights, and ultimately alter the analytic frameworks we use to understand the world around us.

A second methodological feature of comparative area studies is its requirement to pay close attention to context. This imperative is not the first plea regarding the importance of context. For example, Tulia Falleti and Julia Lynch (2009) consider how contextual factors influence the operation of causal mechanisms, and how contextual variation can induce mechanisms to behave differently and produce dissimilar outcomes. In this way, Falleti and Lynch regard context as something that exists independently of a theoretical hypothesis and its attendant causal mechanisms. By contrast, comparative area studies seeks to harness contextual nuance in a more thoroughgoing way. This process involves a "self-conscious effort to adjust the operationalization of concepts, the calibration of measures, and the coding of observations for each case in light of contextual attributes deemed significant by the relevant country or area specialists" (Sil 2018, 233). Catherine Boone's (2003, 354-57) research on institutional frameworks in West Africa provides a region-specific illustration of how such considerations can produce rich concepts and complex measurement schemes. So although comparative area studies practitioners value general concepts and theoretical debates, sometimes including the desire to find "portable mechanisms and causal processes" (Köllner, Sil, and Ahram 2018, 3, 14), contextual factors are not an afterthought. Instead, practitioners believe that "differences in context conditions need to be granted the same theoretical status as those recurrent mechanisms or linkages that are portable" (Sil 2018, 235).

The entreaty to take context seriously relates to one of comparative area studies' practical imperatives. Adherents of comparative area studies strive to appreciate contextual nuance in part by engaging area specialists and their debates. Too often, political scientists remain sequestered from area studies communities. This distance may negatively affect the richness of our case studies. But beyond the potential improvement of a research product, there is a wider communal benefit that may come from engaging area specialists. In my experience, historians and area specialists have seemed genuinely interested to learn about my research topics and, through their probing, have helped reveal conceptual or other ambiguities that may not have occurred to interlocutors with my disciplinary background. Many of those reading this piece have undoubtedly had similar experiences. Thus one practical feature of comparative area studies is dialogical: a desire to make cross-disciplinary engagement commonplace (Sil 2018, 239).

Engagement with area studies communities has potential pitfalls, however. As Lustick (1996) emphasizes, secondary sources are products of how a historian or area specialist interprets the past. They use an implicit framework in their quest to identify the pertinent facts as such (cf. Trachtenberg 2009). Thus when social scientists use these materials, they are not harnessing a neutral and dispassionate record but are drawing on disputable materials. Similarly, area studies specialists often gravitate toward idiographic understandings of their research matter and may be skeptical of comparative research designs. The project of comparative area studies encourages researchers to be aware of and embrace these challenges, in order to enrich their understanding of a case's context and the scholarly debates that surround it (Sil 2018, 235).

For example, Amel Ahmed (this issue) discusses how comparative area studies may help us understand historical actors as they understood themselves and their endeavors, rather than projecting our contemporary impressions of their predicaments onto them. Cross-regional research may assist our quest to empathize with and understand actors in seemingly disparate contexts. Yet as Thomas Pepinsky (this issue) makes plain, just what constitutes an area and how those conceptualizations

ought to frame our research are far from settled issues. An "area" may be less geographically bounded than one might think initially. In different ways, Pepinsky, Ahmed, and Nora Fisher-Onar (this issue) raise fundamental questions about how and why we identify world regions as such, and whether those constructs are the most fruitful way to organize unconventional comparisons.

A second practical imperative of comparative area studies is to examine substantively important phenomena, often with special attention to macro-level factors. My sense is that some practitioners of comparative area studies want to be the standard-bearers of macro-structural research on topics such as democratization, political order, and revolution. There is an intellectual heritage to books such as—to cite a few cross-regional examples—Barrington Moore's *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy*, Samuel Huntington's *Political Order in Changing Societies*, and Theda Skocpol's *States and Social Revolutions*. Indeed, Roselyn Hsueh (this issue) documents an affinity between comparative area studies and how innovative scholars have juxtaposed the Chinese case in new ways. Yet comparative area studies is not inherently disposed toward country-level, macro-structural research. For instance, Benjamin Smith's (2018) contribution to the volume compares separatist conflicts in areas that straddle country borders: greater Kurdistan in the Middle East, the Baloch region in Southwest Asia, and the Tuareg region in North Africa. The research involves surveys and interviews, not macro-structural analysis, although the historical backdrop of the chapter is a macro-political process (post-imperial partitions). Overall, while the discipline has shifted toward case studies analyzing micro-level causal processes (Pepinsky 2019), comparative area studies helps preserve case-based research that is focused on macro-level factors and rich in historical detail.

In describing the features of comparative area studies, I think it is important to note two things that it is not. First, the demand to compare cases from multiple regions is not borne out of a desire to "increase the N" in order to see if the insights generated from the study of one region will "travel" to another. If it were, then one's case studies would become tools that are used to test a nomothetic inference (see Köllner, Sil, and Ahram 2018, 11, 15; Sil 2018, 226-27, 232). And comparative areas studies would be epistemically indistinguishable from standard multi-method research; sure, the tools would differ (cross-regional cases studies rather than large-N analysis), but the two approaches would share the same neopositivist wellspring (Jackson 2011, 67-71). Comparative area studies is not tethered to a particular epistemic project, because its advocates recognize "the epistemological heterogeneity of qualitative research" (Sil 2018, 227).

Instead, and second, comparative area studies embraces epistemic diversity. That means some people employing comparative area studies may very well conceive of their work in neopositivist terms, and some of the chapters in the edited volume could qualify as such. Marissa Brookes (this issue) offers methodological advice to enhance these types of comparative area studies. But the emphasis on contextual sensitivity also makes comparative area studies compatible with some forms of ethnographic research. For instance, Erica Simmons and Nicholas Rush Smith (2019) identify a variety of benefits to be had from comparative ethnography, including detecting commonalities across cases, preventing unwarranted extrapolations of findings from a single case, and sharpening theories and concepts. The spirit of comparative area studies shares much with comparative ethnography. Calvin Chen (2018) illustrates these affinities in his study of how Chinese businesspeople imported their Wenzhou model into Italy in recent years. A third approach to comparative area studies (from this non-exhaustive list) is research that focuses on explanation, rather than interpretation or inference. I describe this research avenue in greater detail in the next section. In sum, comparative area studies has epistemic, practical, and methodological features that help qualify it as a distinctive approach to social science.

Comparative Area Studies Produces Context-Sensitive Explanations

In this section, I describe how comparative area studies can be employed toward the goal of explaining cases. This section draws on my related article (Saylor, forthcoming). As I mention above, comparative area studies is not an approach that seeks to increase the N by adding case studies from one region to see if they corroborate a theory that was originally applied to cases from another region. (If we think of comparative area studies in this way, it ceases to have much distinctiveness.) When one uses case studies to see if they fit a broad cross-case pattern, the case studies serve as tests of an empirical regularity. One is trying to make a causal inference: the process of scrutinizing a theoretical premise with data (Waldner 2007, 150). The requisites for causal inference have long plagued unconventional comparisons. For example, Skocpol and Somers (1980, 191) criticize the "parallel demonstration of history"—in

which one juxtaposes cases to repeatedly show a theory's usefulness—because it does not establish controls and can therefore "only illustrate" but "not validate" a theory. Yet not all social science is oriented to making causal inferences.

Alternatively, one can fruitfully employ comparative area studies to explain cases. An explanation is distinct from an inference. An explanation describes what caused something to happen: it is a statement about how a cause manipulated something and produced its effect (Jackson 2017). One way to explain the outcomes of particular cases is to examine them in relation to an ideal type. Ideal types are deliberate oversimplifications of empirical reality. They can facilitate explanation by forcing researchers to determine, for "each individual case, the extent to which [an] ideal-construct approximates to or diverges from reality" (Weber 1949, 90). Ideal types are not hypotheses to be tested by individual case studies, but rather they are constructs that can help render particular cases intelligible (Jackson 2011, 112-15, 141-55).

Ideal types help researchers explain cases in a few ways. First, they direct our attention; ideal types are things against which the empirical facts of a case can be juxtaposed. Second, when applied to the actual facts of a case, ideal types can reveal the extent to which they account for the permutation of that case. Third, researchers can then identify the other factors that were not described by the ideal type, but which form part of the explanation of how and why a case turned out as it did. Ideal types facilitate explanations of individual cases.

This third aspect of what ideal types can do is where the affinity between explanation, ideal types, and comparative area studies becomes clearer. When one lists the factors that helped shape the outcome of a particular case, but which were not captured by the ideal type, one is adjusting for context. Indeed, Köllner, Sil, and Ahram (2018, 16) write that "what distinguishes (comparative area studies) is the idea that the context conditions across two or more regions—and of countries and locales within those regions—may encompass similarities and differences that affect the operation of more general causal processes and mechanisms." Put differently, an ideal type may describe how some general causal process might operate in an overly simplified world, while contextual sensitivity can elucidate how and why that process played out as it did (or failed to do so) in an individual case.

Boone's (2003) research on state institutions in rural Africa displays these principles. She argues that variations in communal and class structures influenced how rulers built state institutions in the countryside. Boone mentions that she wants to identify "a set of 'ideal type' variations in rural social organization" and their effects on institution building (323). When one case, the Korhogo region in Côte d'Ivoire, does not conform to her model's expectations, Boone forthrightly discusses the idiosyncratic reasons why it does not (244-45). She is adjusting for context. Her explanations persuade because they couple ideal-typical claims with contextual analysis.

Another way that ideal types can assist comparative area studies is with respect to case selection. When researchers use case studies as tests of a broader cross-case pattern, they usually justify case selection in terms of how their cases score on certain variables and whether a case is representative of a larger population of interest. Mill's method of difference, which pairs cases that are similar in many ways but differ on an explanatory variable, is the most common strategy of case selection (Koivu and Hinze 2017). Standard criteria for case selection often imperil cross-regional research. By contrast, because ideal types do not profess to represent actual empirical regularities, but rather ideal-typical causal claims, one can be freed from these case selection strictures. Instead, one can select cases that seem relatable—that is, pertinent and applicable—to an ideal type. Then, the case study itself will reveal whether the ideal type is useful for explaining the facts of the case. Basic contextual similarity can serve as an alternative basis for case selection.

Consequently, in ideal types, practitioners of comparative area studies can find a robust justification for making cross-regional comparisons, even when those comparisons contravene standard prescription on case selection. No longer would researchers succumb to the need to demonstrate "control" over a host of variables, a fundamental aspect of the conventional wisdom on case selection that inhibits comparative area studies (cf. Köllner, Sil, and Ahram 2018, 18). Not only does my approach to case selection facilitate comparative area studies, it also better aligns with the epistemic goals of those researchers who want to produce explanations.

Starting Comparative Area Studies by Appraising Region-Specific Conventional Wisdoms

This final section provides one way that scholars can begin to engage in comparative area studies. I encourage scholars to survey, compare, and synthesize the region-specific conventional wisdoms that surround their research topic. It is a first step to developing a conceptual and theoretical framework that may render intelligible

how your phenomenon of interest has unfolded in a cross-regional contrast space. I think this discussion is best presented through an applied example, so I reference my chapter in the edited volume, which draws on a larger book project (Saylor 2014).

My research analyzed how natural resource booms and different types of political coalitions affected state building in Latin America and Africa (three countries from each region: Argentina, Chile, and Colombia; Ghana, Mauritius, and Nigeria). The simplest summary of the argument and outcomes is that when commodity booms enriched social actors both within and outside of the ruling coalition (Argentina and Chile), more state building occurred than when booms enriched actors who were solely within or outside of the ruling coalition.

At an early point in the project, I surveyed the literatures on state building in each region. In Latin America, the formative state building era was during the period of "outward expansion" (ca. 1850-1900), when Latin American states were strengthening their connections to the world economy. Many studies, epitomized by dependency theory, framed scholarly thought by analyzing the extent to which export elites dictated policy and state building in a given country. Hence, state building was seen as something of a functional outgrowth of deepening economic links. By contrast, the crucial era for state building in Africa came after World War II (ca. 1945-65), when urban nationalist movements gained power. These leaders often installed policies of urban bias and elaborated "neopatrimonial" forms of rule. These respective paradigms do not comprise all accounts of state building in these regions, but in my estimation they are the archetypal themes.

At first blush these conventional wisdoms seem to have little in common. But a virtue of comparative area studies is that I was compelled to compare these conventional wisdoms to each other and to cases from each region. I juxtaposed not only the discrete arguments, but also the conceptual frames that implied how researchers ought to think about these phenomena. These comparisons were not methodologically novel—I am sure many readers have done similar things in their own work—but they are nonetheless worth highlighting. The conventional wisdom on Latin America led me to learn that most African countries also experienced massive commodity booms during their formative state building eras. And the conventional wisdom on Africa helped me appreciate that the types of economic interests encapsulated within ruling coalitions (if any) mattered greatly. Whereas the literature on Latin America parsed differences in export elites at the helm of countries, the literature on Africa laid bare the consequences of having ruling coalitions that did not include actors with direct stakes in exporting. These region-specific conventional wisdoms helped me look at cases from another region from a different viewpoint.

I combined aspects of these conventional wisdoms together in order to relate these cases to each other, develop explanations of their individual trajectories, and pay attention to local context. The cross-regional nature of my comparisons enabled me to interpret cases that are often regarded as regional oddities (Colombia, Mauritius) as having features regularly observed in another region. By design, comparative area studies forces us to reappraise region-specific conventional wisdoms and create a dialogue between literatures. This process is not unique to comparative area studies—a researcher doing good work on one region is usually versed in the basic lessons from research on another region—but comparative area studies may impel researchers to go further than they otherwise might, and these endeavors may yield insights that are presently beyond our grasp.

Overall, the promise of comparative area studies comes not from its methodological novelty but rather from its pluralism. Comparative area studies allows researchers to embrace the fact that context does matter, and in ways that are often not reducible to the variable-oriented thinking prevalent in much contemporary political science. Yet practitioners of comparative area studies also seek to harness general theoretical insights and cutting-edge thinking on causal mechanisms. Thus comparative area studies aims to strike a delicate balance. This goal may be achieved not by conceiving of comparative area studies as a means for causal inference, but rather as something best suited to producing causal explanations.

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