Social Kinds and Comparative Research

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What is comparative inquiry?

- It is social or political research that focuses on the causes and effects of social structures and dynamics and pays close attention to cross-case comparisons.
- Identify similar structures and processes in different social and historical settings.
- Example: How does micro-organizational structure affect the incidence of corruption?
several distinct goals are possible:
  – identify common processes; generalization
  – identify singular or exceptional processes; differentiation

A common research goal: identify the causal properties of a specified set of structures, variables, or circumstances
Method

- select a set of cases in which the variables of interest are present (or absent); examine outcomes; examine mechanisms and processes
- Probe the causal characteristics of these structures through observation of their behavior in different settings.
- Employ Mill’s methods of similarity and difference
Examples

- Robert Brenner on England and France in the case of modernizing agriculture
- Atul Kohli on poverty reform in three states in India
- Theda Skocpol on revolution in China, Russia, France
- Robert Klitgard on corruption
The defining question for this paper

- Comparative inquiry presupposes that there are social things and implies that they fall into categories that can be reidentified across historical and social contexts.
- What ontological and conceptual assumptions must we make in order to be able to support comparative social research?
Why is there a problem of social ontology?

- Asking “why are X’s P” implies that we can identify multiple X’s.
- Asking “why do revolutions occur in agrarian settings?” implies, likewise, that there are multiple instances of revolution.
- We can also ask “What are X’s -- e.g., revolutions?” Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia
Why is there a problem of social ontology?

- These questions imply that there is an important commonality among the things called “X”.
- These questions presume that we can identify a group of events under the rubric “revolution”, and then ask whether there are underlying causal, structural, or agency features that these events share.
Why is there a problem of social ontology?

That is: to do comparative research we must be able to identify historical “things” and subsume these things under “concepts.”
Explanation presupposes ontology

- So we must be able to identify individual entities, structures, and events.
- And we must be able to classify these.
- If we want to make arrive at generalizations across cases, then we need to be able to put forward concepts that identify properties and things that can be identified in the several cases.
Limits of “operationalization”

- There is a common impulse to offer a behavioral/operational/observational definition of the variable of interest.
- “By ‘riot’ we will refer to incidents of violence involving 6 or more people.”
- But: we often wish to capture theoretical constructs that do not reduce to an operational definition.
Things
Ontology

- What exists?
- What **logical features** must things satisfy in order to be things?
- Do things fall into **types** of things?
- Do things fall into **kinds** of things?
Ontological questions

- Do revolutions exist?
- Did feudalism exist in 12th century France?
- Did feudalism exist in Meiji Japan?
- Does feudalism exist?
- Did the Chinese revolution exist?
- Did landlord power exist in 1930s China?
A simple social ontology

- individuals, relations, institutions exist
- individuals have agency within constraints
- institutions evolve to satisfy individual and collective purposes
- institutions and organizations have powers
- institutions have properties of organization and functioning
Higher-level social entities

- State, class, taxation system, religion, Islam--these are non-essentialist concepts that pick out clusters of institutions based on observable features and paradigm instances. They do not constitute kinds.

- Likewise: the political, the social, the religious as “realms”; these concepts too are descriptive rather than types.
Concepts
Social concepts

- Uses of social concepts
  - to classify
  - to categorize
  - to explain
  - to identify individual social occurrences or events
Questions about social concepts

- Are there social concepts that apply validly across culture and historical tradition?
- Are there social concepts that do not apply validly across culture and historical tradition?
Concept and commonality

- what is in common among the things classified under a concept? A range of possibilities:
  - Necessary and sufficient conditions
  - symptoms
  - cluster of properties
  - common structure
  - common causal properties
Varieties of social concepts

- descriptive concepts
- cluster concepts
- structural concepts
- common causal properties
- ideal typical concepts
What types of concepts support explanation?

- Symptom terms and cluster terms do not support explanations.
- That is: we can’t explain why an individual has a given property by answering “because it is a P” where P is a cluster term.
What types of concepts support explanation? (cont)

- structural and causal terms do support explanation

- that is: we can explain why the individual has a given property by answering “because it is a P” where P is a causal kind.

- E.g. x is conductive because it is a metal
Ways that concepts connect to phenomena / things / the world

- reference
- ostension
- concepts single out discrete and definite classes of entities---natural kinds (realism, essentialism)
- loose indication of a domain of phenomena which can be more accurately identified through subsequent inquiry (nominalism)
We can interpret social concepts as a linguistic convenience (nominalism);
or as referential to underlying social entities (realism, essentialism)
the error of reification consists in the social scientist’s assumption that, because he has a concept of X, that X really exists and has an underlying coherent essence. Because the concept of feudalism can be applied to Britain, Japan, and China, the historian may be led to assume that there is a common essence among these.
Instead, the terms are nominalistic groupings.
The concepts are more like ideal types or descriptive concepts than kind terms.
Examples of social concepts

- Proto-industrialization
- Feudalism
- Theatre state of Bali
- Famine
- Grain riot
- City
Conclusions
Are there social things?

- Do social structures have the features of permanence, demarcation, and reidentification that allow us to call them “things”?
- Are social structures more like molecules or clouds?
- Do states, societies, crowds, organizations, institutions, mobs, or classes exist?
Are there social things?

- Yes, there are individual social things we refer to as states, crowds, institutions.
- But no, these individuals do not form social kinds. The things we refer to as “states” or “crowds” do not have underlying essences that permit us to infer to new cases.
Doubt about social kinds

- Terms like feudalism, proto-industrialization, revolution should be understood nominally, not essentially or realistically. They do not refer to a real and unchanging class of instances. Rather, they serve to pick out historical instances which show similarities and differences to paradigm cases.
Doubt about social kinds

- We can be realist about social things--relations, institutions, practices, organizations--in particular settings, but nominalist about the groups of such things across contexts.
Levels of ontological commitment about types

- **strong**: asserts validity of social types across culture and history (the state)
- **weak**: agnostic about different settings; assertive about a connected historical setting (e.g. the Chinese state)
- **ultra-weak**: agnostic about different settings or distant historical settings within a given society
Ontology and comparative research

- A social order existed in Northern France in the 12th century that can be classified as “feudal”.
- The social order existed; feudalism does not.
- This position represents a very sparse ontology. Things exist, but they do not constitute kinds of things.
Ontology and comparative research

- Is this approach enough for comparative research? I believe so. The comparative researcher compares complexes of social relations and institutions that perform certain social functions; and he/she compares, differentiates, and analyzes these complexes.
Ontology and comparative research

- There are “states,” “economies,” and “religions”; but they are heterogeneous groups of social things that share properties in fluid and changeable ways, depending on underlying features of structure and agency that produce these properties.

- It is important to avoid reification and conceptualism (allowing the concept to drive the conclusions).
Social types

- sets of things sharing a list of properties
- sets of things sharing many among a cluster of properties
- sets of things sharing a causal nature
- personality as an example--e.g. Myers Briggs classification of types

back
Social kinds

- When “things” fall into groups that share deep, explanatorily relevant properties, we refer to the groups as “kinds”.
- “Metal” constitutes a kind; “plastic” does not.
- Are revolutions, riots, or kinship systems “social kinds”? 

back
Ideal typical concept

- ideal portrait of a set of processes
- pure construct of typical relationships
- stereotyped or paradigmatic description of a particular configuration of institutions--Protestantism
- e.g. the idea of the medieval urban economy
- back
Descriptive concepts

- Concepts that identify a group of entities in terms of a set of observable properties or features.
- “Symptom” concepts
- Operational concepts--defined in terms of specific measures or operations
- E.g. “naval powers”, “famine”
Structural concepts

- concepts that identify a group of entities in terms of a set of structural characteristics
- presupposition: that there is a common structure
- e.g. free-market commodity regime
- back
Causal concepts

- concepts that group entities in terms of
  - common causal history (volcano)
  - common causal properties (enzyme)
- e.g. free rider problem, collective action problem, subsistence crisis

back
Cluster concepts

- concepts encompassing a variety of phenomena that share some among a cluster of properties, without there being a core set of essential properties (Little 1989)
- e.g. authoritarian state, subsistence farming

back
logical requirements for things

- temporal persistence and continuity;
- criteria of reidentification;
- reasonably clear boundaries
- Note that these are Kantian criteria.
How much change can occur before we say that the thing is no longer the same? The Heraclitus point.

Is the Chinese state the same historical entity in the Han Dynasty and the Qing Dynasty (separated by 2000 years and substantial institutional change)?

back
Proto-industrialization definition

- “development of rural regions in which a large part of the population lived entirely or to a considerable extend from industrial mass production for inter-regional and international markets” (Kriedtke 1981:6)
Proto-industrialization

- industrial production within agrarian social relations
- merchant capital directs production over many small producers
- presupposition: these relations can be identified in Flanders, China, Meiji Japan; and we can infer similar developments in the different contexts

back
Theatre state in Bali

- Negara -- a construction of the highly specific ensemble of institutions, values, and relations that made up the pre-colonial Indonesian state.
- Geertz maintains that this is a concept, not an individual; he estimates hundreds or thousands of negaras in Indonesian history.
Theatre state (cont)

- So: it is cross-time but not cross-culture.
- There is one type -- negara -- that recurs over hundreds of years in Indonesian culture.
- Geertz asserts no cross-context validity of the concept. There are no negara in other cultures.
- Back
What is a city?

A human settlement with minimum size, density, and heterogeneity (Wirth, quoted by Skinner)

Can classify cities by multiple dichotomies; preindustrial-modern; civilization-primitive; region

can look for generalizations within categories.
Or: can look for differentiation and covariation of properties

On this approach the concept is not highly structured or theoretically informed; instead, the researcher identifies the phenomenon loosely and examines the particular instances closely.

Back
Famine

- an extended period of time in a significant geographical region in which large numbers of people have insufficient food to satisfy subsistence needs, and which results in numerous excess mortality.
- The definition does not presuppose common structure or causation.
Why do famines occur?
It is possible that there are multiple answers, corresponding to multiple sub-types of the behaviorally defined “famine”.
That is: a behavioral concept is entirely open to multiple underlying causal etiology.
So: “is famine a kind?” is an empirical and substantive question; not a conceptual question.
Grain riot

- Thompson: not simply “rebellion of the belly”--a spontaneous, spasmodic instinctive reaction to hunger (186)
- Rather, a nuanced collective event that is complex, culturally-mediated, and meaningful.
- The grain riot is typically informed by a legitimising notion (188); a moral economy of the crowd.
“The food riot in eighteenth-century England was a highly complex form of direct popular action, disciplined and with clear objectives” (188).

This is a discovery, however; not part of the concept of “grain riot”.

Back
Feudalism

- The central paradigm instance: the social-economic order found in France in the 9th century.
- Features include: domaine agriculture, serfdom, infeudation of political authority, military prowess concentrated on the lord. The seigneurie.
The question “Was the 12th century Polish social regime an instance of feudalism?” is a substantive question. The historian will find points of similarity and difference.

The question cannot be answered on conceptual grounds.
Explanation

- What states of affairs support the question “what is the explanation of X?”
  - Why did event E occur [in the way that it did]?
  - Why are X’s usually P [revolutions usually violent]?
  - What are the causes of regularity R [democracies don’t go to war with each other]?
Logical structure of explanation

- explanation of an event: E occurred because X
- explanation of a pattern: P persists or emerges because Y
- explanation of a class of events: E’s occur [commonly occur] because Z
A simple world

- things exist
- things have real causal properties and relations
- things can be composed into complexes or “systems” based on their causal properties
- complex or system things can persist or change
A simple world

- change of the state of a complex or system thing is an event
What is an event?

- A change of state within a field of entities and their properties and relations.
- An event is located in time.
- Are there types of events?
Concepts--simple and complex

- single factors (rate of fertility)
- complex properties summarizing a set of factors
- $X$’s have P just in case they have $P_1, P_2, \ldots, P_n$
- for example: $x$ is a “developing economy”
Social ontology

- things
- events
- properties
- structures
- functions
- relations
Examples of types of social events

- individuals do things [differently than in recent past]
- groups of individuals do things
- measurements of social properties change abruptly [prices rise]
Examples of thing terms

- city
- state
- railway system
- currency system
- wage labor system
- labor union
Examples of event terms

- revolution
- hyper-inflation
- coup
- fissioning of a social movement or organization [Reformation]
Examples of tendency / regularity terms

- high infant mortality
- low standard of living
Explanation presupposes ontology

- Historians explain
  - events
  - regularities among events
  - emergence of a structure or organization
  - regularities across instances of a concept
  - specific features of a given structure or process