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Jennifer Cyr and Kendra L. Koivu

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Problems and Possibilities of Comparison Across Regime Types

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During the Cold War, comparisons between the Soviet-led state-socialist bloc and democracies sparked scholarly controversy. Today, with China assuming the mantle of the most significant non-democratic regime model, and with scholars pursuing innovative comparisons between China and other political systems (Duara and Perry 2018; Tsai 2016; Zhang 2013), it behooves us to revisit some of the questions that such comparisons pose. Specifically, when is it reasonable to pursue comparisons, what is their purpose, and what do they entail? In this short piece I will address only some of the issues involved.

The main themes of my essay are as follows. Giovanni Sartori usefully cautioned against comparing unlike entities, yet his advice was overly confining. Sometimes gaps or disjunctures between political phenomena in substantially dissimilar political systems provide opportunities for innovation, even if they complicate Mill-style comparison. In particular, such projects can generate intellectual payoffs through the way in which they *frame* a topic of study, specify its universe of cases, and scrutinize the gains and problems of including phenomena from disparate contexts in a common category. Further, they provide opportunities for *conceptual development* by elaborating on and exploring their shared phenomena, explaining how they vary, and so forth. I argue that these, not merely logics of control, are among the most important benefits of cross-regime comparative research that employs in-depth, qualitative analysis. Such comparisons are not always feasible or useful. When successful, however, they hold the promise of new, thought-provoking theoretical and conceptual departures. I illustrate this with an example from a research project in which I compared China and Taiwan.

Comparison across Dissimilar Political Systems

As political scientists we often compare among cases that fit more or less comfortably within a category precisely in order to achieve controlled comparison through a most-similar systems design. Thus, a study might be framed as "… in modernizing agrarian bureaucracies" or "in transitional democracies" or "in late industrializers." What kinds of problems might a researcher encounter when stepping outside this common template and comparing among dissimilar political systems? Some obvious stumbling blocks include the possibility that data are unavailable or incommensurate in one or more of the cases to be compared. Another is that inquiry across highly dissimilar systems might merely confirm the obvious rather than turning up anything interesting.

A more subtle set of problems could be called concept incompatibility. In a classic article, Sartori cautioned against comparing systems that are fundamentally dissimilar to one another. Things that one would compare must belong "to the same genus, species, or sub-species—in short to the same class," he wrote (1970, 1036). He linked this to his conception of the very purpose of comparative politics, which he saw as "a method of control" in testing hypotheses (1970, 1035).[1] Going beyond such "taxonomical requisites of comparability" is precisely what leads to "conceptual stretching," which generations of political scientists came to recognize as a cardinal sin (1970, 1036). Sartori went on to criticize examples of such hyper-elongation, such as what he considered flawed applications of the terms *pluralism* and *participation*, rooted in "Western democracies," to non-Western, non-democratic polities. So too, concepts like *mobilization* "originate from a totalitarian context," and applying them to the West presents a fallacy of "reversed extrapolation" (1970, 1050–52).

Sartori's article, as well as related critiques in the same era (LaPalombara 1975), reacted against a tendency in structural-functionalist theorizing to paper over deep differences in an effort to apply universal political abstractions. They inveighed against equating particular practices or institutions that have superficial similarities, yet actually work in profoundly different ways.

Sartori's taxonomical metaphor, with its injunction against comparing across genera, may have seemed like a prudent corrective to problematic scholarly trends in 1970, yet appears too confining for today's world. (It

1 We should assess hypotheses and other generalizations against "all cases," Sartori wrote, but those should be all cases within the relevant taxonomical class.

would seem odd to the modern biologists who compare DNA, evolutionary patterns, and more across kingdoms, let alone across lower taxonomic ranks.) His skepticism that any category might travel effectively from "the West" to "Africa or South-East Asia," now seems antiquated. Both Sartori and LaPalombara questioned whether political "participation" could happen in communist regimes, yet certain forms of participation, including grassroots protests, are frequent in today's China. While Sartori objected to using the term "mobilization" in democracies, today it is well-accepted that individuals do not always engage in democratic political action purely on their own initiative, but rather are driven to act by friends, organizations, inspiring leaders, and so forth. One can simultaneously note this and also bear in mind a vital distinction in kind between this and the type of ruling party orchestration that, in autocracies, compels people to cast ballots in sham elections and the like.

The key point here is that we can investigate related phenomena across contrasting political systems, without losing sight of nuances, frictions, and the possibility that they have radically different meanings. Indeed, assessing conceptual fit with care and attention to context is a significant purpose and contribution of comparative work. It is by doing so that we guard against thoughtlessly and misleadingly assimilating unlike things, a danger that Sartori was right to warn against.

Making the case for some degree of comparability across highly dissimilar systems is a crucial part of an investigator's task in such research. A general approach is to argue that an area of politics exists that follows its own distinct rules and patterns, perhaps somewhat isolated from other aspects of the political system, or at least not wholly reducible to it. Zhang, for example, does this in her analysis of the politics of urban preservation, examining how different kinds of governmental fragmentation in Beijing, Chicago, and Paris dictate which historical buildings are protected and which are bulldozed (2013). Another example is Thomas J. Christensen's *Useful Adversaries*, which remarkably compares the United States and China from 1947–1958. He argues that in both countries, leaders stoked low-level conflicts in order to rally the public for long-term security strategies, and that such frictions can spiral into unwanted wars, such as the Korean War (1996).

By their nature, comparisons among highly dissimilar political systems practically require the researcher to confront deep conceptual issues—and qualitative research has an important role to play in so doing. If, as Gary Goertz writes, "a concept involves a theoretical and empirical analysis of the object or phenomenon referred to by the word," it is natural that those working at and around conceptual boundaries will carry out much analytical work (2006, 4). Often the posing of the comparison itself requires or stimulates such efforts in at least two different forms.

Framing the Comparison and Evaluating Fit

In designing a cross-national comparative project, the researcher identifies *what* is to be compared. He or she establishes a universe of relevant cases. Much methodological advice addresses the question of how to select cases once that universe has been defined, but the prior step may be more a matter of creative perceptiveness than of following rules and prescriptions. In Zhang's book, for example, the mere juxtaposition of Beijing with, say, Chicago is itself a startling and intellectually disruptive act for readers accustomed to thinking of these places in completely different theoretical contexts. Particularly when considering widely varying political systems, these "scope" decisions may require substantial research and can be consequential contributions in themselves. As with framing processes more generally, these decisions create an "interpretive schemata that simplifies and condenses the 'world out there' by selectively punctuating and encoding objects, situations, events, experiences, and sequences of actions" (Snow and Benford 1992, 137). Having done this, the researcher scrutinizes the crucial attributes that include certain cases in a common set and exclude others. These characteristics, on which so much hinges, require ongoing evaluation in relation to the purpose and justification for the comparison.

Concept Development

Comparison across dissimilar systems often provides opportunities for conceptual innovation and development even as it poses risks of "stretching." Wide-reaching comparisons can, of course, draw on existing conceptual definitions, but I argue that they are relatively more likely to create opportunities for new departures. This need not, and should not, take the form of haphazardly extending concepts to places where they do not fit. Rather, it can mean defining or discovering categories of empirical phenomena that differ from what is already known and accepted—whether or not they are so novel as to constitute "unidentified political objects" (Jourde 2009, 201). These might be tangible, such as a particular type of organizational structure, or intangible, such as a kind of dynamic within a social movement. Tsai's comparison of "cosmopolitan capitalism" in localities in India

and China, for instance, extends the usually domestic-centered concept of state-society relations to encompass transnational migrants and diasporic communities.

Such possibilities for innovation should be recognized as an important part of what cross-system comparison accomplishes. (The reader will note a kinship with the "casing" process discussed by Soss in this symposium, and to Htun and Jensenius's points on conceptual development.) Innovations through framing and concept development are separate things and need not co-occur in the same project, yet the two are related to one another. As we shift focus away from the familiar and towards less-similar cases, our attention is drawn to conceptual aspects of the cases that went unnoticed or seemed unimportant in other perspectives. ("Unlike the other cases, Indonesia never had A and instead had B, yet it is similar to the others in terms of C, and I wonder if that operates through the same mechanism …"). At the same time, spotlighting different features of the concepts may catalyze efforts to find related, heretofore unexamined, cases that share those features. ("I wonder if Malaysia has something like that …").

Comparing Ultra-local State-sponsored Organizations in China and Taiwan

Taiwan's period of authoritarian rule under the Nationalist Party (KMT) from 1945 to the early 1990s was akin in various ways to authoritarian China under the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). A number of most-similar systems studies have compared the two.[2] Since Taiwan's democratization, however, the two have diverged politically. Even as the opposite sides of the Taiwan Strait retain cultural, social, and linguistic commonalities, present-day comparisons now present special challenges, as well as opportunities.

A project of mine that examined state-society interactions at the very most local level of cities in China and Taiwan illustrates the kind of work entailed in navigating such challenges and opportunities. I sought to explain ways in which citizens looked upon and interacted with government-structured neighborhood organizations, which bring state power and authority into the ultra-local sphere of residential communities. I compared specific institutions in (mainly) the capitals, Beijing and Taipei. In the former, my subject was the official neighborhood organizations, known as Residents' Committees (RCs; *jumin weiyuanhui*), that the Chinese state has maintained since the early 1950s. In the latter, it was the state-sponsored neighborhood offices (*li bangongchu*) that date to the KMT's arrival in the mid-1940s.

What was the basis for comparing these? They have a number of things in common. Both are part of a nationwide network that covers all urban space.[3] While organizational details vary somewhat by locality, they are mandated in national law and correspond to a unified template. A neighborhood has no choice whether or not to have such an office. In both countries, they handle a very wide range of responsibilities. They serve as what might be called all-purpose contact points for state agencies at the community level, for instance helping the welfare bureaucracy to determine households' eligibility for assistance programs by drawing on their local knowledge of residents' circumstances. They also field a seemingly endless variety of queries and demands from their constituents. The similarly statist structure in which they are embedded facilitates the comparison. Comparisons to more liberal settings are harder.[4]

Taiwan's institutions certainly had significant differences from China's. Taiwan's neighborhoods have but a single leader, a warden (*lizhang*), who is partnered with a civil servant (*liganshi*). China's RCs, as their name indicates, are larger committees of 3–7 people, and have become parts of even larger "community" organizations. The two variants differ dramatically in how their leaders are chosen. Taiwan's wardens are selected in open, fair, and usually competitive elections every four years, whereas triennial elections for China's RCs are heavily stage-managed. Also, while neighborhood bodies in both places cooperate closely with the police, in China the police do not merely fight crime but also tamp down and root out dissent. In Taiwan, much more than in China, residents are free to organize independent community groups of their choice. Moreover, while neighborhood Party committees embody China's firm insistence on the CCP's monopoly of political organization, in Taiwan, neighborhood leaders can affiliate with any political party (or run as independents, as many do).

Given this constellation of similarities and non-trivial differences, does comparison across the two commit a taxonomical error in Sartori's terms? A key task in such research is determining in *which aspects* might one fruitfully compare them, and *what benefit* might come from doing

2 I review such comparisons in "China–Taiwan Comparisons: Still Promising Though Not 'Ideal'," Harvard Workshop on Chinese Politics, February 23, 2018, http://cnpoliticsworkinggroup.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Ben-Read_China-Taiwan-Comparisons.pdf

3 In China and Taiwan alike, these organizations also have rural counterparts.

4 One article compares Shanghai's RCs to Los Angeles's neighborhood councils. This results in some astute observations, but mainly a catalog of structural contrasts (Chen, Cooper, and Sun 2009).

so. To blithely take the Beijing "elections" at face value, for example, would indeed conflate categories and risk stretching concepts beyond meaning. Or, to give another example, comparing these institutions in terms of their relationship with political parties would produce little or no new insight; they differ just as we would expect of organizations in a single-party authoritarian regime and a pluralized democracy.

But if we think of them in terms of the role that they play in ordinary people's lives as intermediaries between state and society, a more productive basis for comparison emerges. One might expect that their facilitation of administrative and policing work would be strongly and universally disliked in China, in particular, given the Chinese state's repressive nature. This was not the case, providing one aspect of a puzzle. Thus, I undertook the task of explaining variation in residents' opinions of and interactions with these organizations in both Beijing and Taipei.

On one level, this comparison involved a logic of control, exploring how regime type affected or did not affect outcomes. People's perceptions of grassroots-level governance indeed *differ* along certain lines. For instance, residents in China largely acknowledge that their elections are rigged, whereas those in Taiwan appreciate the agency they have in voting for favored warden candidates or against a poorly performing incumbent. More surprising were broad *parallels*. Residents of Beijing and Taipei had many similar patterns of opinions and perceptions of their neighborhood leaders, it turned out. Those who didn't like them, or found them unimportant or irrelevant, did so for the same types of reasons (for instance, young, childless professionals whose lives had little connection to the neighborhood often felt this way). On the other hand, those with more favorable views (often, for instance, elderly residents, or those with businesses in the community) looked to neighborhood leaders for help with similar kinds of problems, and often appreciated their keeping an eye on the locality. In a nutshell, I traced this to, first, the similar webs of interpersonal networks that linked people with their community chiefs through various kinds of social structures, activities, and services, and second, to a shared and widely prevalent vision of the proper state-society relationship as being close and intimately cooperative. Looked at in this way, a set of common "inputs," X_c, led to a similar distribution of values of Y despite differing contexts, X_d.

Yet the nature and benefits of the comparison went beyond this basic "method of agreement" logic.[5] The very process of working across systemic differences rooted in parallel but divergent histories reframed how I thought about the topic itself. It forced me to re-confront the question "what is this a case of?" Originally I had thought of the RCs as part of a category of "mass organizations" common in other Communist systems. What became clear through the process of reframing, however, was that, in fact, this topic was one of broader relevance found not merely in the cases of China and Taiwan, but in a diverse set of political systems.

My term for the phenomenon under study was administrative grassroots engagement, or institutions "in which states create, sponsor, and manage networks of organizations at the most local of levels that facilitate governance and policing by building personal relationships with members of society" (Read 2012, 3–4). Establishing this category did not happen overnight, but emerged from an extended process of research: conducting more than 20 months of immersive fieldwork in China and Taiwan, reading widely, working with other scholars, making a field research trip to a third country, and ultimately co-editing a book on related cases (Read and Pekkanen 2009).

Countries featuring such institutions included Japan, South Korea, Vietnam, Singapore, and Indonesia. In today's world, they span a range from autocracies to democracies; regime type seems less important than having a certain kind of statist and corporatist orientation in which the state proactively structures and draws upon grassroots institutions. Exploring the boundaries and background of this conceptual category brought into focus the historical connections that link certain key cases. Some are fairly well known among specialists, such as imperial China's *bao-jia* institution. At the same time, not all variants can be traced to direct historical predecessors, nor is the phenomenon entirely confined to East and Southeast Asia. States develop and maintain their own forms of grassroots engagement institutions in response to varying imperatives and pressures.

The point here is to emphasize the important aspects of comparison that involve framing the cases and defining the subject under study. The comparison, relatedly, enabled different and deeper forms of conceptual work than would have been possible in a single-country study. For example, while administrative grassroots institutions are always distinct from autonomous civil society groups,

5 The project involved comparisons at multiple levels: among different residents within a neighborhood; among different neighborhoods (with different kinds of leaders, housing, and demographics); and among different cities. Here I focus on the cross-national dimension.

they pursue related activities and, in some ways, mimic the functions, activities and rewards of voluntary groups. So too, while the organizations in question overlap and have some commonalities with Gregory Kasza's administered mass organizations (1995), they also buck this categorization in various ways, from the voluntary nature of citizens' participation to their persistence in political systems that have transitioned from authoritarian to democratic regimes. They thus hold a number of conceptual surprises.

In carrying out this comparison, extensive field research involving interviews and ethnographic site visits played an essential role. This was certainly true for the Millian aspect of the comparison. Interviews, for example, were crucial for assessing how residents perceived their neighborhood organizations (the Y variable), and for delving into and evaluating possible reasons behind those perceptions (the X variables). Yet these up-close techniques were just as important, if not more important, for the conceptual work involved and for understanding how the Chinese and Taiwanese institutions were similar to or different from each other and how they related to other country cases. Immersion in each locale made it possible to navigate the dangers of interpreting Taiwan in overly Sino-centric terms, and of conceptually stretching by assimilating it too much to China, or by equating state-sponsored organizations with independent ones. It allowed me to parse the commonalities and divergences, and fine-tune an assessment of the kinds of power that these local authorities hold (Read 2018).

Conclusion

Comparing things that are unlike each other in far-reaching ways indeed has pitfalls, as Sartori pointed out. Yet his critique should not deter us from considering ambitious and creative juxtapositions. Comparison across dissimilar systems does not necessarily mean committing errors of conceptual incompatibility or blurring categories to the point of meaninglessness. The key to avoiding trouble is not to confine oneself only to comparing political systems of the same "species." Rather, it lies in remaining aware of the full meanings and contextual dependencies of concepts one is working with; staying alive to the danger that the comparison is putting square pegs in round holes. At the same time, if there is some reliable path to innovation, it must be simply and constantly stepping back and reconsidering the fit between phenomena under study on the one hand, and existing social science concepts on the other. It requires a combination of thoughtful caution and initiative.

How should one preempt or respond to a reviewer's Sartorian critique? The best advice seems to be not to duck the potential problems or issues that your comparison raises, but address them squarely and up-front. Explain why what you are studying spans taxonomic categories in meaningful ways. In the style of a devil's advocate, adopt the skeptical perspective, work through the possibility that you are "getting it all wrong," and then explain to the reader where that perspective fails and what important truths it would miss.

Finding novelty while avoiding "stretching" is facilitated by up-close, in-the-field analysis. Immersion, whether in textual evidence or in field sites, gives the researcher continual opportunities to sharpen his or her sense of how best to conceptualize the political world (Kapiszewski, MacLean, and Read 2015, 20–26). One needs this kind of sensibility to navigate between the errors of a taxonomical stay-in-your-lane rigidity on the one hand, and pell-mell conceptual conflation on the other.

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