

## Comparative social inquiry

### What is comparison?

**Comparison** as a generic aspect of human thought

**Comparative method** systematic analysis of phenomena in more than one setting

‘The difficult but crucial task for the comparative analyst is to devise the methods necessary to construct meaningful theoretical and analytic statements about government and politics [society, social groups, socio-political phenomena] within...complex and largely unplanned settings.’

B.Guy Peters (1998) *Comparative Politics: Theory and Methods* (London: Macmillan), p. 3

### Is there such a thing as ‘the’ comparative method?

Øyen (1990):

- Purists
- Ignorants
- Totalists
- True comparativists

Consider: *Can single case studies ever be comparative?* (cf. Rose (1991: 454) ‘extroverted case studies with generic concepts’) *Can within country comparisons ever be ‘comparative?’* (cf. Hantrais and Mangen 1996)

### What types of approach?

**Case-oriented** or ideographic approach: the particular

- Cases as configurations
- Causal historical conjunctions
- Attention to deviating cases – test of applicability
- Outcome complexity

**Variable oriented** or nomothetic approach: the general

- Cases as groups of variables
- Permits statistical analysis
- Attention to dominant patterns - test of generalisability
- Outcome simplicity

Consider: *Is there necessarily a trade-off between detail of analysis & explanatory emphasis? Is the only true comparative analysis variable oriented* ( Przeworski & Teune 1970)?

Consider: *Should ideographic approaches precede nomothetic ones to create a holistic but ‘scientific’ comparative method?* (Lijphart 1971)?

What logics of comparative enquiry?

J.S. Mill's divisions – the problem of causation

- Method of Agreement
- Method of Difference
- Method of Concomitant variation

Prezeworski and Teune (1970)

- Most similar systems: controlling for 'extraneous variance' (Peters 1998: 30ff); case as unit
- Most different systems: Popperian 'falsifiability'; variable-oriented

Consider: *Must comparative research be causal in intent? Does this affect MSS/MDS strategy, or is it not always a useful distinction?*

Fallacies & pitfalls in comparative enquiry

- Ecological fallacies
- Linking levels of analysis: explicit & systematic
- Case selection
- History
- Researcher paradigms & national traditions