The Role of General Theory in Comparative-historical Sociology

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The methodological foundations of comparative-historical sociology have been transformed dramatically in recent years. Arguments against general theoretical models have proliferated, while the complexity and uniqueness of historical events and the virtues of inductive methods have been emphasized. The growing convergence of sociology and history has led to a decline in the use of general theories. This article begins with a description and analysis of the recent transformation of the methodology of comparative-historical sociology. An overreliance on inductive methods has resulted in inadequate specifications of causal relations and causal mechanisms in recent comparative-historical sociology. The concluding section discusses a nascent rational choice research program in political sociology to illustrate an alternative methodology.

Suppose that radical shifts in the points of view which constitute an item as an object of investigation have taken place. Suppose that, as a result of these shifts, the idea arises that the new “points of view” also require a revision of the logic of scientific research that has hitherto prevailed within the discipline. And suppose that the result of all this is uncertainty about the “essential purpose” of one’s own scientific work. It is incontestable that the historical disciplines now find themselves in this predicament.

[Max Weber (1922) cited in Oakes (1975, p. 15)]

The role of general theory in comparative-historical sociology is under attack. Several major comparative-historical scholars have published methodological manifestos inveighing against analyses derived from gen-

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eral theories in favor of those primarily based on induction (Bendix 1984; Stinchcombe 1978; Tilly 1981, 1984; Skocpol and Somers 1980; Skocpol 1984; Ragin and Zaret 1983; Zaret 1978). Because of historical contingency and context dependency, the best we can do—these writers argue—is develop explanations that are limited to particular spatiotemporally defined units (Skocpol 1985, p. 28; Ragin and Zaret 1983, p. 740; Tilly 1984, p. 14; Bendix 1963, 1984; Chirot 1985; Roth 1971; Zaret 1978; Mann 1986).

These methodological arguments attempt to justify an orientation to the relation between theory and data that traditionally has been more historical than sociological. Historians’ methodology stresses the accuracy and descriptive completeness of narratives about particular events. Since the events they seek to describe and explain are both unique and complex, historians are compelled to tolerate a certain degree of methodological license. They are prepared to employ loose conceptualizations (Coats 1989, p. 347) and often resort to nonrigorous methodologies (Sewell 1987, p. 170). Instead of relying on necessary explanations, historians are willing to use sufficient ones, in which an event is taken to be a natural outcome of a sequence. The structure of their arguments, therefore, tends not to be implicative (involving deductive logic), but conjunctive (involving the use of coherent narrative).

Are the norms of history coming to replace those of sociology in judgments of comparative history? Several comparative-historical sociologists have cited historians’ methods approvingly (Stinchcombe 1978, p. 23; Skocpol 1986, p. 194), and many others have advocated a methodological convergence of sociology and history. Zaret (1978, p. 118), for example, suggests that “analytic historiography obviates the ideographic/nomothetic cleavage between history and sociology.” For Abrams (1982, p. ix), sociology and history have a “common project.” Giddens (1979, p. 230) argues that the two disciplines are and should be the same (see also Burke 1980, pp. 28–30; Stedman Jones 1976; Tilly 1970; Wallerstein 1979, p. x).

Comparative-historical sociologists are tending to move from arguments against specific theories to arguments against theory in general. Almost all the polemics against general theory in this literature begin as criticisms of specific theories, especially functionalism and Marxism (see

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Such antitheoretical notions are quite novel in sociology. Probably the greatest classical statement of comparative-historical methodology is by Weber, and his position has been uniformly praised by contemporary comparative-historical scholars (see Stinchcombe 1978, p. 22; Skocpol 1979, 1985; Ragin and Zaret 1983; Bendix 1984; Mann 1986). Even Weber, however, believed that the understanding of historical outcomes could only be attained by wedding general, transhistorical concepts (“historical models,” or ideal-types) to specific courses of events (“secular theories”) (Roth 1968, 1971). Until the last decade or so, most American sociologists both noted and praised the distinction between sociology and history, viewing sociology as the more general and theoretical (nomothetic) and history as the more particular and descriptive (ideographic) of the two disciplines. In consequence, sociologists were favorably disposed to the use of general theories in comparative-historical research (Holt and Turner 1970, p. 2; Marsh 1967, pp. 18–20; Smelser 1959, pp. 2–8; 1968, pp. 90–91; Zelditch 1971).

What accounts for this major shift in emphasis? To some extent it can be traced to the existence of a theoretical vacuum in the discipline. The decline of the hegemony of functionalism and the failure of Marxism to take its place have left sociology in a “theoretical interregnum” (Wiley 1986). The current crop of comparative-historical sociologists came of age when these two perspectives were competing for theoretical dominance. For many in this generation, these two deeply flawed theories stand as proxies for all theory, and their rejection is tantamount to a rejection of the entire theoretical enterprise.\(^2\)

\(^2\) Given this, it is odd that comparative-historical sociologists often denigrate theory by invoking the name of Weber. Contemporary Weberians have been much more antitheoretical than was Weber himself. Weber’s *Economy and Society* ([1922] 1968) contains a long, detailed, systematic discussion of his methodology, his orienting concepts, and the relation between the two. Weber’s concerns are much more explicitly theoretical than those of most contemporary self-described Weberians (with the exception of Eisenstadt and Collins). Reuschemeyer (1984, p. 161), e.g., notes that “Max Weber was far more willing than Bendix to state causal generalizations.”

\(^3\) “We sixties-generation people do not yearn for one grand sociological theory such as Parsonsian structure-functionalism; nor do we imagine that sociology can be a pure, cumulative, technically-grounded science” (Skocpol 1988, p. 632). In this article, we do not venture to discuss functionalism and Marxism, since they have been criticized so often.
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This article contends that those who seek causal explanations of historical events cannot hope to dispense with general theories. This is because adequate explanations must specify both causal relations between variables (including models that indicate how causal factors are interrelated) and the mechanisms responsible for producing these relations. Whereas causal relations sometimes can be inferred from empirical observations, causal mechanisms in social science can only come from general theories.4

WHAT ADEQUATE EXPLANATIONS MUST ENTAIL

There is wide agreement across social science disciplines about the first requirement of an adequate explanation—causality. Variable Y is causally dependent on variable X if and only if by modifying X one can (or could) affect Y. An explanation entails the assertion of such a causal relation, in that the fact to be explained is seen as the product of the other fact(s) implicated in the explanation. A causal relation is self-determined and not parasitic on other causal influences. Causal relations must be inferred because, following Hume, it is generally acknowledged that causality can never be directly observed. Rather, it must be interpreted on the basis of observables (Holland 1986, pp. 947–48). One of the principal concerns of sociological methodologists has been to elucidate the conditions under which it is justifiable to infer causal relations. Causal inferences are easiest to draw from experimental data, for in these data the cause of interest is subject to manipulation, while other causes presumably are subject to control.

To justifiably infer causality, all possible spurious causes of Y must be ruled out.5 Since there is no opportunity to manipulate causal factors in nonexperimental data, drawing causal inferences from these data raises much greater problems. Yet these are the kinds of data that most sociolo-

4 With the exception of Stinchcombe (1978), recent discussions of comparative-historical methods have focused only on causal relations. Causal mechanisms have been given little attention.

5 The problem of spuriousness typically arises when a variable that is the apparent cause of some effect is revealed later to be the product of some temporally prior variable. Recent research on deterministic chaos brings to light a quite different problem of spuriousness. This might be called the spurious assumption of randomness. A series of events that is seemingly the product of a purely random process (such as fluctuations in the stock market) on later analysis may be discovered to be the outcome of a simple, deterministic, nonlinear mechanism (Anderson, Arrow, and Pines 1988). For an attempt to model stock market fluctuations as the outcome of a deterministic chaotic process, see Day and Huang (1989). Whether deterministic chaos has much relevance for the kinds of problems that sociologists are concerned with remains an open question (for a skeptical opinion by a sociologist, see Berk [1988, p. 158]; for optimistic opinions by economic historians, see Day [1983] and David [in press]).
gists collect and analyze, and they employ various conventions—with varying degrees of success—in their efforts to avoid inferential errors (Berk 1988). If it is difficult to justify causal inferences in nonexperimental data, it is far more difficult to do so in historical data, for by their very nature such data allow for minimal manipulation and control.

Yet even when causal inferences can be justified in historical data, this will not suffice for explanatory purposes. A complete explanation also must specify a mechanism that describes the process by which one variable influences the other, in other words, how it is that \( X \) produces \( Y \) (Blalock 1961, p. 9; Salmon 1984, chap. 5; Elster 1989, pp. 4–7; Lloyd 1989, p. 461). Mechanisms are vital to causal explanations, for they indicate which variables should be controlled in order to highlight existing causal relations. The explicit discussion of mechanisms makes it more difficult to make ad hoc arguments and often reveals contradictions in arguments that would not be apparent just from a list of causal relations. General causal mechanisms also yield the numerous precise empirical implications necessary for testing theories.

Yet, like causality itself, mechanisms are not directly observable. How then are they to be imputed? The development of consensus on the existence of atoms and molecules offers a clear example from the physical sciences (see Nye 1972). Whereas atomic conceptions of matter date from antiquity, no strong evidence for the atomic theory of matter was available before the beginning of the 19th century. During this century, well-informed scientists could hold different viewpoints on the question. By 1912, the issue was settled in favor of the atomic/molecular hypothesis. This achievement was due to the determination of Avogadro's number \( N \), the number of molecules in a mole of any substance. This number provides the link between the macrocosm and microcosm; once it is known a variety of microquantities are directly ascertainable. Although there had been early estimates of \( N \), the scientific community was not persuaded until a variety of independent estimation techniques (including studies of Brownian motion, alpha decay, X-ray diffraction, blackbody radiation, and electrochemistry) all provided the same, exact estimate of \( N \).

Since the social sciences are not exact, causal mechanisms in social

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6 "There appears to be an inherent gap between the languages of theory and research which never can be bridged in a completely satisfactory way. One thinks in terms of a theoretical language that contains notions such as causes, forces, systems, and properties. But one's tests are made in terms of covariations, operations, and pointer readings. Although a concept such as 'mass' may be conceived theoretically or metaphysically as a property, it is only a pious opinion, in Eddington's words, that 'mass' as a property is equivalent to 'mass' as inferred from pointer readings" (Blalock 1961, p. 5; emphasis in original).
science are unlikely to be established in such a relatively direct fashion. According to Hume ([1748] 1894, I.iii.12), whenever the source of some event is unobserved, we should proceed on the hypothesis that it fits a pattern of causal uniformity.7 Causal uniformity implies the existence of a lawlike relationship that holds between events. In addition to uniformity, lawlike relationships must be universal,8 omnitemporal, and contingent—that is, not logically necessary (Beauchamp and Rosenberg 1981, pp. 84–88). In essence, causal explanation works by subsuming events under causal laws (Elster 1983, p. 26),9 and causal laws, in turn, derive from general theories.10

Since different general theories produce different mechanisms, how can the most appropriate mechanism be selected from all possible candidates? Although there is no hard and fast rule, plausibility, reduction of time lags between cause and effect, and the empirical implications of different mechanisms can all serve to distinguish between rival causal mechanisms.

In the first place, only certain types of mechanisms are deemed plausible by the relevant scientific community at any given time.11 For example, many have noted a fairly strong (but far from perfect) correlation between economic development and democratic political systems. Because of an inability to specify adequate causal mechanisms, it is not clear whether these two factors are causally related and, if they are, which is the cause and which the effect. Lenin’s ([1918] 1964) argument that developed capitalist economies have democratic states because democracy is the “best possible shell” to conceal class domination relies on functionalist mechanisms now regarded as implausible. Lipset’s (1960,

7 Of course, it will not be possible to explain all events as the outcome of uniform causal laws. Some events will remain anomalous from the perspective of existing theories (and will thus lead to the progressive modification of these theories). However, the conclusion that an event is “unique” (and therefore cannot be explained by existing causal laws) should be the result of theoretical and empirical analysis, not an assumption with which analysis begins.

8 In some cases, the laws will take the form of conditional universals, in which the scope conditions within which the law holds are specified abstractly.

9 For a discussion of the differences between this notion of explanation and Hempel’s “deductive-nomological” model, see Beauchamp and Rosenberg (1981, pp. 305–21).

10 These limitations rule out historical narratives as a basis for the imputation of causal mechanisms. The evidence derived from such narratives may be critical in assessing the empirical implications of rival causal mechanisms, however.

11 Every day the sun rises in the east and sets in the west at predictably different times. Yet the class of plausible mechanisms used to account for this empirical regularity in the Ptolemaic era of astronomy was very different from that in the Copernican era. In this way the criterion of plausibility sharply constrains the range of appropriate causal mechanisms.
pp. 27–63) modernization theory suggested that economic development facilitated democracy by decreasing inequality (thus creating a moderate, democratic middle class) and creating liberal democratic norms through education. Recent work indicates that economic development often does not decrease inequality (Evans 1979) and that education often does not create liberal values (Weil 1985), making Lipset’s mechanisms seem less plausible. Although there is no consensus now about what mechanisms best explain this relationship, Bates and Lien (1985) provide one plausible account that is based on general theory. They argue that economic development increases the mobility of taxable assets, thus increasing the bargaining power of taxpayers relative to rulers (since mobile assets make tax avoidance easier). Under these conditions, rulers will be more willing to give up some control over state policies (by creating democratic institutions) in exchange for tax revenue.

However, plausibility alone is unlikely to point to a unique causal mechanism. Since the elimination of spuriousness is the fundamental challenge to the justification of causal inference, the greater the reduction of the time lag between explanans and explanandum, the more preferable the mechanism (Beauchamp and Rosenberg 1981, chap. 5). A mechanism that involves a large time lag between explanans and explanandum leaves greater latitude for the introduction of spuriousness. One way to minimize the explanatory time lag is to specify mechanisms that link macro-level variables using intervening micro-level ones:12 “Although the purpose of a mechanism is to reduce the time lag between cause and effect, the success of the reduction is constrained by the extent to which macro-variables are simultaneously replaced by micro-variables” (Elster 1983, p. 24).13

For example, most recent studies of the causes of war consist of inductive generalizations formed from correlations between structural vari-

12 It is not always necessary or useful to provide mechanisms at the micro level. As Jackson and Pettit (in press) point out, structural causal mechanisms (which they call “program” mechanisms) sometimes provide adequate explanations of macro-level phenomena. Models of natural selection provide one example. Situations in which structural factors are so powerful that regardless of what happens at the micro level the outcome will be unchanged do not require micro-level causal mechanisms either. However, these structural mechanisms are only sufficient under certain, very limited, conditions. In our opinion, since these conditions are rarely found in the topics studied by sociologists, most comparative-historical explanations that rely solely on structural arguments are incomplete.

13 Yet, “from the standpoint of either scientific investigation or philosophical analysis it can fairly be said that one man’s mechanism is another man’s black box. I mean by this that the mechanisms postulated and used by one generation are mechanisms that are to be explained and understood themselves in terms of more primitive mechanisms by the next generations” (Suppes 1970, p. 91).
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ables. These studies have looked at the relationship between factors like economic cycles, internal conflicts, and alliance structures, and the frequency of war initiation and intensity (Bueno de Mesquita 1980). One problem with this literature, and no doubt part of the explanation for the contradictory findings in it, is the large time lag between these putative causes and their effect. This time lag may be reduced by specifying the micro-level factors (interests of relevant actors) (Bueno de Mesquita 1981) and meso-level factors (determinants of the outcomes of political conflicts between these actors) (Kiser 1989) that intervene in the relationship between structural factors and war initiation.

Finally, even if they are not directly observable, different causal mechanisms often have different empirical implications. We are most likely to be persuaded by the appropriateness of a causal mechanism when we find evidence of specific features of an outcome that is uniquely implicated by that particular mechanism. The point can be illustrated in the following sociological example. Four factors—common ethnic background, hierarchical authority, obligatory confession, and the wearing of uniforms—have been found to be positively correlated with the longevity of 19th-century American intentional communities. Two different mechanisms have been proposed to explain the relationships between these institutional arrangements and community longevity. In one view, the four factors are commitment mechanisms that contribute to communal longevity by strengthening members’ identification with their group. In another view, the four factors enable members to reap economies of control so as to curtail potential free riders. The two mechanisms have at least one different empirical implication. If internalization is the proper mechanism, then these institutions will disproportionately be found in the initial stages of community development. If control is the mechanism, however, then these institutions will be found at all stages of community development. The available data reveal the superiority of the second mechanism (Hechter 1990a).

14 “Observational evidence for a theory which contains non-observable terms is evidence for the truth of its as yet untested observational consequences even though the deduction of these consequences may crucially involve the non-observational portions of the theory” (Boyd 1973, p. 2; emphasis in original).

15 The point also can be made by returning to the Copernican example. Two different mechanisms were used to account for the relative motion of the earth and the sun. The Ptolemaic mechanism implicated the sun as the moving body and the earth as the stationary one. The Copernican mechanism implicated the sun as the stationary object and the earth as the moving one. If scientists had had the opportunity to observe the solar system from an orbital platform, the superiority of the heliocentric mechanism could have been established thereby. The great debate about the nature of our planetary system was occasioned only by the unavailability of such direct evidence.
General Theory

The number and type of empirical implications of explanations determines their testability.\textsuperscript{16} Explanations from which many diverse empirical implications can be derived are easiest to test (Stinchcombe 1968, pp. 19–20). Moreover, only explanations that produce \textit{precise} empirical implications can be tested (Merton 1957, pp. 97–99). Numerous, diverse, and precise empirical implications can only be produced by general theories with clear explicit assumptions, models specifying relations between causal factors, general causal mechanisms, and derived propositions. Much of what is deemed theory in sociology, such as typologies, orienting concepts, and empirical generalizations, cannot generate testable empirical implications.

As a result of the narrowness and lack of precision of their empirical implications, explanations in current comparative-historical sociology have become difficult if not impossible to test. The predominance of historians’ norms in comparative-historical sociology has led to an imbalance in the nature of explanation: scope (generality) and analytic power have been minimized and descriptive accuracy has become the predominant criterion for constructing and judging explanations (see Heckathorn 1983, 1984; Blalock 1984). Middle-range explanations—those not derived from general theory but tailored to fit a particular historical object—have come to dominate comparative-historical sociology. Generalizing these explanations beyond particular historical cases is often discouraged (Tilly 1975; Skocpol 1979),\textsuperscript{17} but explanations with so few empirical implications cannot easily be tested (Popper [1934] 1959, pp. 112–13; Stinchcombe 1968, pp. 17–22).

The overemphasis on descriptive accuracy has resulted in a decrease in the analytic power of explanations, which also limits their capacity to be tested (Heckathorn 1984, p. 297). Analytic power depends on the number of independent variables (the fewer variables to be measured, the easier it is to test), and the number of relations between these variables (the more relations, the easier it is to test). The stress on the descriptive accuracy has produced explanations consisting of long lists of causal factors, and the rejection of general theory has resulted in a lack of

\textsuperscript{16} A complete discussion of the necessary and sufficient conditions for a theory to be testable is beyond the scope of this paper. Thus, we make no attempt to specify all of the sufficient conditions but concentrate only on a few of the most basic necessary conditions.

\textsuperscript{17} An additional difficulty raised by limiting the scope of explanations by tailoring them to particular cases is that this method does not produce the anomalies that are necessary for progress in science (Popper 1959; Kuhn 1962; Lakatos 1978; Bhaskar 1975). An anomaly is a research finding contrary to a prediction derived from a theoretical framework. Anomalies only arise from precise theories that make explicit predictions: they are the products of theoretical boldness (Kuhn 1962, p. 65).
models indicating relations between these factors (e.g., see Tilly 1975; Chirot 1985). When data are fragmentary and hard to come by—as often is the case in comparative-historical research—only a theory with high analytic power, and thus low data input requirements, can be tested (Heckathorn 1984, pp. 302–3; Lenski 1988, p. 168; Blalock 1984, p. 90).

WHY CAUSAL RELATIONS ARE ESPECIALLY DIFFICULT TO INFER IN COMPARATIVE-HISTORICAL SOCIOLOGY

Beyond their common commitment to an inductive methodology, comparative-historical sociologists have serious methodological disagreements: some are best considered historicists, whereas others are generalists.\(^\text{18}\) However, neither of these types is likely to produce satisfactory causal explanations of historical outcomes.

The Liabilities of Historicism

Historicism, the approach closest to that practiced by historians, is the most radical departure from the methodology of mainstream sociology. Historicists—Reinhard Bendix and Michael Mann are prominent exemplars—reject positivist (and most postpositivist) philosophy of science, as well as theory in any of its guises.\(^\text{19}\) They favor interpretations that stress the complexity, uniqueness, and contingency of historical events, and holistic approaches to the study of history.\(^\text{20}\)

The epistemological justification of historicism rests on Weber's

\(^{18}\) We do not mean to imply that historicists and inductive generalists agree on all methodological issues. Historicists have been critical of the comparative inductive method (Mann 1986, pp. 501–3), and inductive generalists have been critical of historicism (Skocpol and Somers 1980, p. 192; Tilly 1984, p. 73).

\(^{19}\) Bendix is a much stronger proponent of historicism than is Mann; his rejection of theory is nearly total. At some points, Mann makes arguments rather close to ours (1986, p. vii), although the general thrust of his work is definitely historicist. In the preface (p. vii) he mentions “testing theories” favorably, but by the end of the book he describes his method in much looser terms, as “careful historical narrative, attempting to establish ‘what happened next’ to see if it has the ‘feel’ of a pattern, a process, or a series of accidents and contingencies” (p. 503).

\(^{20}\) There are two different forms of historicism, empiricist and interpretive. Empiricist historicism views knowledge as cumulating through the gathering of facts about the past. The scholar using this methodology claims to have no theory (preferably no preconceptions at all) but simply lets the facts speak for themselves. Although some traditional historians have endorsed empiricism (among them Dray [1957, p. 106] and Elton [1967, pp. 52–56]), it has few advocates among philosophers or comparative-historical sociologists. We will therefore focus on the interpretive form of historicism (based on the work of Weber and phenomenologist and hermeneutic philosophy) and refer to it simply as historicism throughout.
method of Verstehen (Bendix 1984, p. 31) and on phenomenological and hermeneutic traditions (Gadamer 1972; Ricoeur 1984). The fundamental tenet of historicism is that the methodology of the social and historical “sciences” is unique. Since social reality contains an important subjective dimension that is revealed only through interpretative understanding, the social world cannot be known in the same objective causal manner as the natural. Hence, the detached objectivity that is often assumed to be necessary for causal analysis is unattainable. Historicists subscribe to a conventionalist philosophy of science that leads to a rejection of general causal laws (Bendix 1984, p. xiii; Mann 1986, p. 341).

Gadamer (1972, p. 116) summarizes this position well: “Historical consciousness is interested in knowing not how men, people or states develop in general, but, quite on the contrary, how this man, this people, or this state became what it is; how each of these particulars could come to pass and end up specifically there” (see also Mann 1986, p. 32). Historicians often conceive of the relation between particular events as contingent and accidental.

They are also methodological holists: for them the parts can be understood only in relation to the whole (Gadamer 1972, p. 146). Following Maitland’s famous aphorism that history is a seamless web, historicists aim to construct descriptively rich narratives to capture the complexity of historical events.

Yet, since no description is, or ever can be, complete, assumptions and conceptual orientations often remain implicit or hidden in historicist research. Because historicists are not explicit about their reasons for focusing on some aspects of events and not on others, the biases in their incomplete descriptions are not obvious.

Historicism offers a difficult target to criticize, for it does not provide a set of clear and explicit rules but remains a loose, abstract orientation defined more by what it denies than what it affirms. Many historicist arguments ring true: every historical event is at least in some respects unique, and history is very complex. But do these truisms about history justify a radical rejection of general theory?

The historicists’ antipathy to theory is based on an invalid inference.

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21 This historicist argument does not lead to the conclusion that causal laws are not possible in the social sciences. Lakatos (1978) has shown that the progress of competing research programs does not depend on their proponents being detached, neutral, or value free (which obviously they are not).

22 Thus Mann (1986, p. 505): “The origins of the European miracle were a gigantic series of coincidences.”

23 Thus Reuschemeyer (1984, pp. 145, 150–52) criticizes Bendix for “hidden assumptions” and an “inclination toward historical narrative in which much of the more detailed theoretical reasoning is buried, if it is made explicit at all.”
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drawn from some reasonable premises. Granted, historical events are
often complex and unique, but this does not mean that general theories
cannot help explain them (Blalock 1961, p. 7). Individual human beings
are also complex and unique, but this does not mean that general theories
are useless in accounting for their behavior.

Ironically, the historicists’ emphasis on the complexity of history
(Mann 1986, pp. 4, 28; Chirot 1985, p. 181),24 and their rejection of the
analytical separation of parts from wholes, is inimical not only to general
theory but also to the very enterprise of comparing different societies—a
fact that few scholars in this tradition seem to recognize. Comparative
history is an oxymoron to a true historian; for that reason, the enterprise
itself is held in low repute by many professional historians.

The Liabilities of Inductive Generalism

Inductive generalism is by far the most popular methodology in
comparative-historical sociology, and Theda Skocpol is its most promi-
nent practitioner.25 Generalists attempt to apply Mill’s (1888, bk. 3,
chap. 8) method of agreement and method of difference to the joint
analysis of multiple cases, so that they may create and evaluate histori-
cally limited explanations. Many of the philosophical and methodological
difficulties surrounding the use of induction in sociology are by now
familiar. Mill himself regarded the difficulties as so severe that he be-
lieved the inductive method inappropriate for the social sciences (Mill
1888, bk. 4, chap. 7; for a critique of the utility of these methods for
causal inference, see Cohen and Nagel [1934, chap. 13]). Both Durkheim
(1982, pp. 150–51) and Weber (Oakes 1975, pp. 24–25) explicitly criti-
cized the Millian inductive method, as do most contemporary philoso-
phers of science.26

24 For example, the “theoretical model” that opens Mann’s book contains two types
of causal arrows: unbroken lines denoting relations that lend themselves to theoretical
analysis and broken lines denoting relations “too complex to be theorized” (1986,
p. 28). The latter predominate.
25 Theda Skocpol’s substantive studies of social revolutions and welfare states have
combined important criticisms of existing theoretical perspectives with insightful em-
pirical generalizations about important historical events. She has also been self-
conscious and explicit about the methodological underpinnings of her work. It is
therefore instructive to focus in detail on Skocpol’s arguments because she has applied
her inductivist methodology well. Several critics have noted methodological and theo-
retical problems with Skocpol’s research on revolutions (Nichols 1986; Sewell 1985;
Taylor 1988; Burawoy 1989). We will broaden these criticisms by putting Skocpol’s
work on revolutions in the context of her work as a whole and by discussing its
relation to current trends in comparative-historical sociology.

26 “Philosophy of science increasingly is coming to question the importance of induc-
tive confirmation in the ongoing epistemic enterprise of science, thus relegating even
Use of the inductive method in comparative-historical research is simply inappropriate. For most of the subjects that comparative-historical sociologists are wont to explore, the ratio of cases to variables is too low for this method to yield any conclusions.27 Further, Millian induction relies on the assumption that the cases to be compared are independent, but this raises Galton’s problem (Hammel 1980, p. 147): diffusion and imitation connect societies so that few cases of interest are truly independent (Skocpol’s revolutions are a case in point). Because cases must be independent, the inductive method cannot be used to study changes in one case over time. This rules out analysis of the diachronic dimension, or relegates it to a narrative account outside the inductive method, and places the analytic focus on static comparisons between cases.28 Since the best way to test causal arguments is to follow cases over time, this is a severe limitation (Klein 1987, p. 23; Tilly 1975, pp. 11–12).

The approach often leads to sampling problems as well. Comparative-historical research is especially interesting because it focuses on large-scale historical events, such as the origins of modern states and nations (Tilly 1975),29 the development of dictatorships and democracies (Moore 1966), and the causes and consequences of famous social revolutions (Skocpol 1979). Selecting “interesting” events for analysis is a type of sampling, however, and a none-too-systematic type at that. Since arguments in the inductive-generalist tradition are constructed from the bottom up, they reflect the bias inherent in the unsystematic nature of the sample from which they were drawn. If arguments are generalized from the sample, this bias will diminish their explanatory value, if not vitiate it altogether.30

issues of local induction to a relatively minor role in scientific reasoning and further repudiating the central importance ascribed to induction and confirmation by the positivistic program” (Suppe 1977, p. 631). Note that most realist philosophers of science (who adopt a position closest to the one we advocate here) also reject the sufficiency of induction (Keat and Urry 1975, p. 35).

27 This is the principal difficulty that motivates Ragin’s (1987) Boolean algebra approach to comparative analysis.
28 This is a serious difficulty for Skocpol because her historical orientation emphasizes the importance of processes and sequences of events (thus the privileging of the narrative form). Skocpol tries to get around the problem in States and Social Revolutions by adding the diachronic element in the form of abstract narratives. In effect, she combines generalist and historicist methods without clarifying the exact relation between the two (Nichols 1986).
29 This is not true in all of Tilly’s work. The Vendee (1964) explores a much less intrinsically important event, and, not coincidentally, that analysis is much more theory driven than most of his subsequent work. He focuses on a general explanation, arguing that it is applicable to a wide range of times and places (Tilly 1964, p. vii).
30 To be evenhanded in our criticism, this type of bias is also a difficulty with Hechter (1975).
These problems make it difficult to test the relationships derived from inductive procedures. As an example, consider Skocpol’s research on revolutions. Skocpol first limits the testability of her causal relations by disclaiming their generalizability and warning against “mechanically” extending them to other cases (1979, p. 288). Despite this, she then tries to apply the causal links generated from her study of the French, Russian, and Chinese revolutions to the Iranian Revolution (Skocpol 1982). The looseness of her argument is clear on the first page of the article, where she alters the definition of her dependent variable, social revolutions (cf. Skocpol 1979, pp. 4–5; 1982, p. 265). The definition of social revolution used in the Iranian case (unlike the one employed in her study of France, China, and Russia) includes a change in the “dominant ideology.” This change in the explanandum is accompanied by a change in her argument (see also Arjomand 1988, p. 191). In spite of Skocpol’s (1979) earlier strong objections to the use of ideology as a causal factor, it becomes one of the important explanans in her study of Iran (Skocpol 1982, p. 275).

The causal factors Skocpol identifies for the revolution in Iran are significantly different from those she suggested were important for the French, Russian, and Chinese revolutions. Losses at war are absent and are replaced by a fall in oil prices; peasant insurrections are absent and are replaced by urban revolts; and subjective and ideological factors become an important part of the story (Nichols 1986, pp. 181–84). Does this mean that Skocpol’s earlier arguments have been tested and proven false? Not at all. Skocpol avoids testing her causal relations in two ways: she argues that Iran is “unique” (1982, p. 275), and she suggests that, although most of the specific causal factors have been changed, the Iranian Revolution can still be interpreted in terms that are “analytically consistent” with her previous “explanatory principles” (p. 268). These disclaimers exemplify the central weakness of inductivism: by relying on historical uniqueness and on vague “explanatory principles,” inductivists’ arguments are essentially untestable (see also Burawoy 1989, pp. 775, 778).

The Millian inductive method alone is insufficient to establish causal relations in comparative-historical research. Some theory is also necessary (Skocpol and Somers 1980) to guide the choice of appropriate cases and to select appropriate factors for inclusion in the model (Ragin 1987).

The inductive method involves several additional problems. It assumes that dependent variables always have the same causes, thus denying the possibility of various sufficient causes. The conditions necessary for the method of difference to hold—the similarity of all but one factor in two (or more) cases—almost never exist outside the laboratory.

31
The methods of agreement and difference will produce results that are a direct function of the cases chosen and the factors included.\textsuperscript{32}

Yet, the role of theory is seldom specified in methodological discussions of research based on the inductive method. Two different strategies are used to avoid discussing its role. One is a move toward empiricism: "How are we ever going to arrive at new theoretical insights if we do not let historical patterns speak to us, rather than always viewing them through the blinders, or the heavily tinted lenses, of pre-existing theories?" (Skocpol 1986, p. 190). Another is the reduction of theory to something intuitive, as Skocpol does when she speaks of using "strategic guesses" to choose causal factors to be included in her model (1979, p. 39), or "hunches" to form hypotheses (1986, p. 190).\textsuperscript{33} Hunches and intuition certainly have their place in research praxis, but they are hardly a substitute for general theory as a basis for the imputation of causal mechanisms.

THE FAILURE OF INDUCTION TO SUGGEST CAUSAL MECHANISMS

Not only is induction poorly suited for the establishment of causal relations in historical sociology, but it cannot lead to the specification of the mechanisms that constitute the enduring focus of sociological explanations, either. Mill's methods of agreement and difference say nothing about the ways that causes produce effects; the application of these methods produces a set of consistent correlations, at best. Sociologists do not teach \textit{Suicide} because Durkheim established reliable correlations between suicide rates and types of religion or family structure. Instead, our

\textsuperscript{32} In \textit{States and Social Revolutions} Skocpol (1979) gives two accounts of case selection, one based on her personal history (pp. xii–xiii) and the other on the similarities between the cases themselves (pp. 40–42; see also the stress on similarity as a criterion for case choice in Evans, Rueschemeyer, and Skocpol [1985]). Most of her papers on the welfare state contain no explicit discussion of case selection. (See Skocpol 1980; Skocpol and Ikenberry 1983; Weir and Skocpol 1985. Orloff and Skocpol [1984] is an exception, however; in that paper cases are chosen on the basis of previous theory.) The method of choosing cases is especially important for Skocpol because of her reliance on induction to produce generalizations. In a recent paper on the welfare state, she argues that she wants to use "comparisons among Sweden, Britain, and the United States to develop an explanation" (Weir and Skocpol 1985, p. 119). Yet if explanations are built on the basis of comparisons of particular cases, then the explanation is a function of the particular cases chosen for comparison. Since no compelling arguments are given as to why these cases and not others were chosen, no generalization beyond the particular cases studied is warranted.

\textsuperscript{33} Skocpol is not the only comparative-historical scholar to view the "theory" with which one begins a research project in such loose terms. Mann (1986, p. vii) also talks about beginning with "theoretical hunches," and Stinchcombe (1978, p. 4) suggests research should begin with a "vague general notion."
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interest is held by the various causal mechanisms that Durkheim advanced to account for these correlations (in this case, the breakdown of normative controls over egoism). The same is true of Marx. Even though many of his predictions have turned out to be incorrect, Marx's work provides important causal mechanisms derived from general theory.

In most recent comparative-historical work, causal mechanisms are either absent, implicit, or used in an ad hoc manner. But sociologists who seek consistent, testable causal explanations for historical events are ill-advised to proceed in this fashion.

We all know that there were revolutions in France in 1789, Russia in 1917, China in 1949. Skocpol shows that—given certain common structural conditions (among them, external geopolitical pressures on states)—the existence of strong peasant communities is positively associated with the outbreak of revolution. Even if we grant the validity of this causal inference, a satisfactory explanation must reveal why revolution occurs where peasant communities are strong. What is the mechanism that links revolutionary outcomes with this particular structural precondition? Such mechanisms must be imputed from general theories.

Taylor (1988) offers one such mechanism, derived from the theory of repeated games. He claims that it is rational for individuals in solidary peasant communities to participate in revolutionary collective action. This particular mechanism is drawn from the analogy of peasant communities with N-person prisoner's dilemma supergames. Since the definitional requirements of these supergames are explicit, the appropriateness of the analogy is subject to empirical disconfirmation. Thus, one of the assumptions of this mechanism is that participants must engage in social relations that recur indefinitely. This carries with it the empirical implication that the incidence of collective action should vary inversely (ceteris

34 We focus in this section on Skocpol's argument about the relationship between peasant communities and revolutions, which, as others have noted, lacks adequate causal mechanisms (Taylor 1988; Burawoy 1989, p. 771). Although space limitations do not permit us to include several other examples, we suggest that the lack of causal mechanisms is common in contemporary comparative-historical sociology. The problem is not limited to the Weberians we discuss, but also is present in the work of many contemporary Durkheimians and Marxists (see also Hunt [1984, pp. 3–14] on theories of revolution). Both functionalist (Swanson 1960, 1967; Erikson 1966) and world-system (Wallerstein 1974, 1980, 1989) analysts meet many of our criteria for general theory, but neither adequately specifies causal mechanisms. Mechanisms are often absent in functionalist work (see criticisms by Homans [1964, pp. 813–15] and Wuthnow [1985, pp. 779–800]) and are specified in an ad hoc manner by Wallerstein. The absence of causal mechanisms in these works is due to their inadequate micro-foundations (as is the case with Skocpol). Furthermore, the lack of causal mechanisms is not limited to comparative-historical work. Coleman (1986, pp. 328–29) notes that it is common in contemporary survey research in sociology, as well.
paribus) with the mobility of peasant communities (for in relatively mobile communities, the durability of social relations is questionable). Another requirement of the mechanism is that participants must share common knowledge about each other's past behavior (Hechter 1990b). The empirical implication of this is that the incidence of collective action should vary directly (ceteris paribus) with the density of settlement patterns in peasant communities (for monitoring costs are higher in scattered settlements).

Clearly, historical peasant communities in large states like France, Russia, and China varied significantly along these—and other—dimensions, and if Taylor's mechanism is correct we should be able to retrodict which kinds of villages (and regions) should have evinced the highest rates of collective action.35

AN ILLUSTRATION: THE DETERMINANTS OF STATE AUTONOMY AND ITS EFFECTS

Some of the most significant research in inductivist comparative-historical sociology concerns the extent and determinants of state autonomy and the formation of state policies. Recently, an interdisciplinary research program based on rational choice theory has begun to explore the same topics. The use of different methodologies to address similar substantive problems provides an opportunity to compare inductivist and historicist approaches to the analysis of state autonomy (Skocpol 1979, 1980, 1985; Mann 1984, 1986) with those based on a general theory—in this case, rational choice (North and Thomas 1973; Bates and Lien 1985; Kiser 1987, 1989; Levi 1988). Both approaches have attempted to answer two basic questions: (1) What explains variations in state autonomy? (2) What are the determinants of variations in state policies? The nature of their answers should reveal much about the utility of their respective methodological positions.

35 While we have been critical of an exclusive reliance on induction, there is little reason to believe that a purely deductive approach offers a superior alternative. After decades of development, axiomatic theory in sociology (Berger, Zelditch, and Anderson 1972) has failed to cast much light on real-world problems. The same cautionary verdict must hold for purely deductive strategies in other disciplines, such as repeated game theory (Hechter 1990b; see Milgrom, North, and Weingast [1990] for an intriguing blend of induction and game theory), and public choice theory (Mueller 1989). Similarly, the theory of public goods (Olson 1965; Hardin 1982) has not been able to explain why revolutions sometimes do occur or why so many Americans turn out at elections. Unlike pure deductivists, we have no doubt that history matters. For a critique of deductive chauvinism—the view that the only logical devices required in the empirical sciences are deductive—see Grunbaum and Salmon (1988).
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Skocpol and Mann on State Autonomy

Skocpol and Mann (and other inductivists) have contributed a great deal to our understanding of state autonomy. They have demonstrated that states are potentially autonomous and that the extent of autonomy varies across time and space (Skocpol 1979, 1985; Mann 1986). Both have identified structural factors related to variations in autonomy in particular historical settings, and each has made general statements about what sorts of factors are likely to influence state autonomy. The more autonomous the state, the greater its latitude in setting policy, both domestic and international. Therefore, they have shown that state autonomy is an important determinant of state policies.

Skocpol argues that the causal factors determining the autonomy of states are geopolitical and international orientations, domestic order-keeping functions, the organizational capacities of state officials, the structure of the state apparatus, prior state policies, and the resources available to the state and other actors (1979, p. 30; 1982, p. 267; 1985, pp. 9–11, 16–17). Her “state-centered” approach suggests that these political factors will be the most important causes, but it does not contain a model specifying how they are related or the conditions under which each of them is likely to be more or less important. Nor does her approach include general mechanisms that indicate how these factors produce variations in autonomy. Since she denies the possibility of a general theory of state autonomy (1979, p. 30), her analyses consist of descriptions of the relationships between subsets of these factors and state autonomy in particular historical cases (Skocpol 1979; Skocpol and Ikenberry 1983).36 But how can we judge the validity of her arguments? Skocpol's state-centered approach is too vague to generate precise empirical implications, and her historical analyses generate too few empirical implications, making her explanations untestable.37

Although Mann is also skeptical about the possibility of a general theory of state autonomy (1984, p. 206), he does discuss some factors related to it. He begins (1984, pp. 196–207; 1986, pp. 416, 514–15) with a functionalist argument that autonomy is positively related to the “social utility” of “territorial” functions (such as property rights and geopolitical diplomacy) that only a state can provide. These functions are then ex-

36 Skocpol devotes much more attention to the consequences of autonomy for state policies than to the causes of autonomy, so we also will concentrate on her analysis of state policies.

37 As Skocpol has moved from a “state-centered” argument (1979) to one labeled “institutional-political process” (1988), she has expanded the number of causal factors included and further decreased the analytic power and testability of her arguments (see Piven’s [1989] criticisms).
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exploited by state rulers trying to increase their power. If "civil society forces" cannot "control" states (their ability to do so is primarily determined by resource distributions), state autonomy will increase. However, if rulers cannot control state officials, resources will be lost to "civil society" and autonomy will decline (1984, pp. 203–5; 1986, pp. 437, 478–82).

Mann's explanation of variations in state autonomy, like Skocpol's, is too incomplete and vague to yield precise empirical implications. Granted, resource distributions and the ability of subjects to use organizations and institutions to control rulers are important determinants of autonomy. These insights constitute only the beginnings of an explanation of state autonomy, however. Their explanations do not indicate when and how groups are able to act collectively to control rulers, how resource distributions produce variations in autonomy, what types of control mechanisms are most important, or how they constrain the actions of rulers. A complete explanation would have to include models specifying how these factors are related and causal mechanisms indicating how they produce variations in autonomy. Only then would precise empirical implications emerge. But models and mechanisms can only come from general theory, which both Skocpol and Mann reject.

A Rational Choice Model of State Autonomy

Rational choice theory provides one source of testable theoretical models that can subsume the important insights of Skocpol and Mann and complete the project they have begun. All rational choice explanations begin with the assumptions that individuals are purposive and intentional actors who pursue prespecified goals. Given these goals, the resulting actions of rulers will be determined by variations in structural constraints. Beginning with these basic assumptions, rational choice political sociologists then apply one or more of the causal mechanisms derived from available theories—such as power-dependence theory, repeated game theory, optimal location theory, agency theory, and group solidarity theory—to the problem at hand (see Friedman and Hechter 1988).

The problem of state autonomy can be modeled in a very simple fashion. In the first stage of the model, the autonomy of the state is conceived to be a function of the relative power of rulers vis-à-vis their subjects. This relative power is principally affected by (1) the degree to which rulers are dependent on subjects for revenue and other resources (Emer-

38 Rational choice explanations of macrosocial outcomes usually include the additional assumption that actors are self-interested (for reasons explicated in Hechter [1987, pp. 31–32]).
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son 1962, 1981) and (2) the capacity of subjects to monitor and sanction rulers (derived from agency theory [Jensen and Meckling 1976] and group solidarity theory [Hechter 1987]).

The dependence of rulers on subjects varies inversely with the value of resources controlled by the ruler, but it also varies directly with the mobility of subjects' resources (since mobile assets are easier to conceal or move to another country [Bates and Lien 1985]). One empirical implication can be drawn from the first proposition: the greater the value of crown lands owned by absolute monarchs, the greater their autonomy. An empirical implication of the second proposition is that the greater the proportion of total national resources controlled by merchants (as opposed to landlords), the lower the autonomy of rulers. Przeworski and Wallerstein (1988) develop the argument further, by showing that the dependence of the state on capitalists, who control the mobility of capital, is much greater when the state relies on taxes from income rather than those from consumption.

The other principal factor affecting the autonomy of the state is subjects' capacity to monitor and sanction rulers (Hechter 1987; Kiser 1987). Agency theory (Jensen and Meckling 1976) offers one way to model this process. A principal-agent relation exists when one or more persons (the principal) engages another (the agent) to perform some service on its behalf that involves the delegation of some decision-making authority. Because the agent (in this case, the ruler) always chooses to exercise this authority to promote its own interests at the expense of the principal's (subject's), a problem arises. To insure that the ruler acts in their interests, subjects must possess a capacity to monitor and sanction the agent's behavior.

The main empirical implications of this model are that control capacities of subjects will vary directly (and thus the autonomy of rulers will vary inversely) with the political organization of subjects (ranging from peasant communities to political parties), with the existence and strength of independent representative assemblies and independent judicial insti-

39 Several additional empirical implications follow from this and other propositions in this section; we will provide only a few examples. Moreover, these are isolated examples taken out of the context of the general model and are thus only true ceteris paribus. A complete analysis of state autonomy would have to look at the overall effects of resource distributions and all relevant control capacities.

40 The high autonomy of Henry VIII (relative to Elizabeth I and the early Stuarts) and of Gustav Vasa in Sweden (relative to Queen Christina) can be explained in part by their possession of resources from crown lands (Kiser 1987).

41 The importance of the mobility of subjects' assets explains why the rise of Parliament is associated with taxes on "movables" in medieval England (Bates and Lien 1985) and why capitalists have increasing power over the policies of contemporary states.
tutions, and with constitutional limits on ruler’s authority (such as the Magna Charta).

Consequences of State Autonomy: Contrasting Explanations of State Policies

The reason many scholars have become interested in the autonomy of rulers is because it is thought to be a decisive factor in determining state policies. However, the relationship between the autonomy of rulers and the policies of states is mediated by the interests (goals) of rulers and other relevant actors and the ability of rulers to control state officials. Policies vary as the autonomy of rulers varies because the ruler’s interests often differ from those of other political actors. The interests of relevant actors thus provide the micro-level causal mechanisms necessary to explain the relationship between state autonomy and state policies. In rational choice theories, interests are specified a priori, thus allowing for testable predictions to be made about how variations in autonomy (and other structural factors) will affect state policies (Bates 1981, 1983; Kiser 1987; Levi 1988).

In contrast, Skocpol and Mann (and most other contemporary comparative-historical sociologists) primarily use ad hoc narrative ac-

42 In early modern Western Europe, representative assemblies were institutions that offered subjects monitoring and sanctioning capacity over their rulers. Yet the location and forms of these assemblies varied widely. Why, for instance, did England develop a national legislative assembly, while regional ones were dominant in early modern France and Spain? One reason is that France and Spain were larger territories, and principals would have had to bear larger costs traveling to the capital to control their royal agent (Levi 1988).

43 The presence of strong representative assemblies limited the autonomy of absolutist rulers by limiting their fiscal extractions. For example, Parliament consistently blocked the attempts of Charles I to raise the tax revenue necessary to participate in the Thirty Years’ War, while French and Spanish rulers, not faced with strong national representative assemblies, were able to field massive armies (Russell 1971, pp. 298–310; Kiser 1987). In absolutist Spain, tax rates were much higher in Castile (where the representative assembly was weak) than in Aragon, Valencia, or Catalonia (where representative assemblies were strong) (Myers 1975, pp. 60–65; Kiser 1987).

44 Other structural factors also influence state policies directly and mediate the relationship between autonomy and policies by constraining the choice sets of actors. Although we realize the importance of these factors, in order to simplify our argument they will not be discussed.

45 The cost of making any general, a priori assumptions about the interests of actors is some loss of descriptive accuracy. For example, since some political actions are normatively or emotionally motivated, no rational choice theory will provide an accurate description of all state policies. This is the price that must be paid for a testable general theory. However, Weber (1968, p. 21) points out that the use of the rational choice assumptions can facilitate the study of normative and emotional bases of action, since these are highlighted as anomalies by a precise model.
counts to specify the interests of actors. Although both often state that actors are purposive and self-interested (Skocpol 1979, pp. 29–32; Skocpol 1985, p. 15; Mann 1977, p. 286; Mann 1986, pp. 4, 29–30), they neither use these assumptions consistently nor make the additional assumptions about goals necessary to produce precise empirical implications. For Skocpol, rulers sometimes act in their own material interests (1979, pp. 29–30, 48) and sometimes act on “society’s behalf” (Skocpol and Ikenberry 1983, p. 98), and at other times their actions are shaped by cultural factors (Skocpol and Ikenberry 1983, pp. 91, 108; Skocpol 1988, p. 307). Since Skocpol provides no arguments about the general conditions within which these different interests will occur, her descriptions of particular state policies cannot be tested. Mann suggests that the goals of individuals are “not relevant” to his arguments and that the relationship between individual action and macro-level outcomes (such as state policies) is “too complex to be theorized” (1986, pp. 29–30). Rational choice theorists disagree and are attempting to specify general causal relations and mechanisms that produce state policies.

A comparison of explanations about the initiation of war, one of the most significant policies of any state, illustrates the importance of general micro-level mechanisms. Although war plays an important role in arguments made by Skocpol (1979) and Mann (1986), their lack of consistent and precise specifications of interests prevents them from developing a theory of war initiation. Mann sometimes explains war initiation in terms of material interests (1986, pp. 101, 252–55, 431–32; 1987, pp. 36–38) and at other times relies on normative/cultural specifications of interests (1986, p. 431; 1987, pp. 39–41). Skocpol’s (1988) most extended discussion of war initiation contains no general discussion of the interests of political actors. As a result of their lack of micro-level mechanisms, neither Skocpol nor Mann has developed testable explanations of war initiation.

Yet it is possible to combine models of autonomy with assumptions about interest to develop such a theory for absolute monarchies. War was a policy generally favored by absolute monarchs but opposed by many of their subjects (Kiser 1989). It stands to reason that autonomous kings are likely to enter into wars, for when these adventures are successful they add to the king’s patrimony, and when they are unsuccessful a large proportion of the costs of wars often can be shifted to subjects. Thus, Kiser, Drass, and Brustein (1991) have found that rulers in early modern Western Europe who possessed substantial independent resources were more likely to initiate wars than those who did not.46

46 The fiscal policies and economic policies of states also are determined in part by state autonomy and can be analyzed with the same type of theoretical models and mechanisms (North and Thomas 1973; Kiser 1987; Levi 1988).
The second factor mediating the relationship between state autonomy and state policies is the ability of rulers to control state officials. Even rulers with high autonomy from social groups will not be able to pursue policies in their own interests if they cannot ensure that state officials will carry out their commands. Both Skocpol (1979, p. 89; 1985, p. 16) and Mann (1984, pp. 205, 211; 1986) discuss this issue often in their accounts of state policies, but since neither has models or mechanisms, they do not provide a general theory of rulers' capacity to control officials.

The ability of rulers to control officials can be modeled with group solidarity (Hechter 1987) and agency theory (Jensen and Meckling 1976)—it is a function of resources, monitoring, and sanctioning. Levi (1988) argues that rulers will choose the most efficient available means of controlling state officials within the limits set by the power of corporate actors. Thus the rulers of republican Rome initially adopted tax farming because it was more efficient than its bureaucratic alternative, but retained it in later years (despite its growing inefficiency) because rulers had grown dependent on the resources of tax farmers. Moreover, Kiser and Tong (1989) show that variations in the level of corruption of state officials in Ming and Qing China can be explained by differences in the costs of measuring taxable assets, the monitoring capacities of rulers, and the level of officials' salaries.

State autonomy and the formation of state policies thus can be analyzed as the product of multiple, interacting agency relationships. When combined with the theory of group solidarity, agency theory provides a parsimonious model that is general enough to apply to the relations between social groups and rulers (the focus of Marxists and pluralists) and between rulers and state officials (the focus of Weberians). The causal mechanisms derived from these theories are plausible and generate relatively precise empirical implications. Some of these empirical implications have received support. Of course, different causal mechanisms derived from other general theories might one day provide superior explanations of these phenomena. Yet no causal mechanisms can be derived from induction alone; since they reject general theory, inductivists cannot construct comparable explanations that are both plausible and testable.

CONCLUSION

Purely inductive comparative history runs the great risk of being considered inadequate both as history and as sociology. Historians reviewing books by comparative-historical sociologists often complain that their

47 The inability of Tudor monarchs in England to enforce their economic regulations (North and Thomas 1973) and of rulers of Ming China to enforce fiscal policies (Kiser and Tong 1989) illustrates the problem.
broad canvas and reliance on secondary sources result in superficiality and misinterpretation (see Appleby 1979, pp. 337–38; Monas 1980, p. 300; Cameron 1981, pp. 343–45; Weber 1987, p. 852). Comparative-historical sociologists should be able to reply that in spite of these flaws—which can be minimized but probably never wholly removed in this type of research—their works do contribute to an understanding of the social world by providing general explanations of facts about diverse historical societies and cultures.

For reasons elaborated in this article, scholars who reject general theories cannot make this response and remain vulnerable to criticism from sociologists (and even some historians) to the effect that their explanations are too undeveloped and vague to have determinate empirical implications (see Dunn 1980, p. 67; Appleby 1979, p. 338; Calvert 1981, p. 93; Stinchcombe 1982; Tilly 1987, p. 630).48

To be sure, induction is necessary in comparative-historical research. The evidence that is uncovered by inductive methods is essential both for the establishment of causal relations and for the assessment of the appropriateness of alternative causal mechanisms. Although causal inference is especially problematic in historical research, comparative historians also need to pay much greater heed to the mechanisms that produce the causal relations revealed by their empirical research. An exclusive reliance on the inductive method has led many contemporary scholars to ignore the vital role of causal mechanisms in historical explanation.

It is time to redress the methodological imbalance, caused by an over-reliance on inductivism, that has swept comparative-historical sociology. The role of causal mechanisms will continue to be ignored in an intellectual climate in which the importance of general theories is denigrated.

REFERENCES


48 Needless to say, not all the reviews of this work have been negative, and even the cited reviews sometimes praise certain features. These reviews are cited not to imply that this research is of poor quality but simply to indicate some shared problems that result from the rejection of general theory.
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