COMPARATIVE-HISTORICAL SOCIOLOGY: 
THEORY, METHODS, APPLICATIONS
Sociology 920:520:01
Department of Sociology
Rutgers University
Spring 2010

Instructor: Paul McLean
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Class time: Thursdays, 1:10-3:50
Office hours: Tuesdays (Douglass Student Center) 1:00-2:00, Wednesdays (LSH, A336), 1:00-2:00, Thursdays (LSH, A336) 5:30-6:30, and by appointment

This course provides an overview of theories, methods, and major concepts used in comparative and historical sociology. [The hyphenation of these two terms and what they mean, together or separately, is a matter of ongoing contention.] One of our objectives will be to develop competency in figuring out meaningful comparisons as we carry out research. Another will be to think carefully about how to match research questions with the right kind of evidence to answer those questions. This matter involves the important issue of figuring out what constitutes a meaningful case to study. A third objective will be to master some important concepts—sequence, path dependency, emergence, recombination, the *longue durée*, and so on—that may guide our thinking about historical change and/or focus our attention on particularly critical processes. Most importantly in my view, it is a course in which we read a number of exemplary studies provoking us to think historically, or demonstrating how sociologists can engage with topics and cases of historical importance. Although we will spend a good deal of time on questions of method—basically the first half of the course is methods and theory—I do not regard this course simply as a class on comparative-historical method(s).

It is not very easy to specify the subject matter of comparative-historical sociology. Typically comparative-historical sociologists are more likely than other sociologists to study cases other than the U.S. They frequently use (or at least refer to) multiple cases to explicate a substantive problem, often to show divergent processes or pathways in those multiple cases. They are likely to refer to cases in the past that are both interesting in their own regard, and significant for explicating the present. And they are interested in large-scale phenomena that take place in or otherwise affect multiple locales. But these criteria are by no means sufficient conditions to define the field.

Comparative-historical sociologists have already largely moved beyond simple adoption of grand historical narratives, like ‘the rise of capitalism’, or ‘the growth of the modern state’, or ‘globalization’, or ‘the rise of civil society’, and so on. We have been operating for a long time in an intellectual climate conducive to articulating “mechanisms” of historical change as clearer, better specified bases for making causal arguments—better than invoking inchoate forces or trends, and better than making static comparisons. I am
interested, among other things, in showcasing arguments that identify causal factors, processes, concepts, actor interventions, and so on, that produce divergent, historically momentous outcomes from ostensibly common roots, or conversely show convergence from different origins. I confess that I personally am more interested in the ‘historical’ part of comparative-historical sociology than the ‘comparative’ part. I believe historical cases are especially enlightening loci for examining cultural difference and for examining social phenomena from a structuralist standpoint, and I intend to spend a good chunk of time on those ideas.

Of all fields in sociology, comparative-historical analysis may be the most prone to excessive generalization, narrative simplification, and weakness and selectivity in its evidentiary basis. But this is often due to the immensity of the questions posed, and the difficulties faced in answering those questions conclusively. Again, scholars working in this field are typically struggling to get a handle on large-scale social, political and economic phenomena and dynamics of the greatest importance for a clear-headed assessment of how the world as we know it came to be, and how it used to be otherwise. I hope this course will help students understand and appreciate, as well as critique, excellent works of comparative-historical analysis. These skills in turn should help students who want to pursue comparative-historical research to make more careful and thoughtful contributions to the field.

**Course Requirements**

As with any graduate seminar, participation in class discussions is essential for one’s appreciation and mastery of the material. We will follow a discussion format as much as possible. The course will have a sakai website, and by 8:00 p.m. on Wednesdays I will expect all participants to post a brief 1-2 page memo about the readings, including at least two explicitly formulated questions they would like to see raised during class discussion the following day. At least two readings must be addressed per memo. In addition, twice during the semester I will assign short writing exercises for you to complete. Finally, at the end of the semester, you will submit a 15-20 page term paper. This project will be: 1) your own original research, taking the form of an empirical paper using historical case materials; OR 2) a critical essay reviewing and juxtaposing different materials we have covered during the semester; OR 3) a kind of detailed research proposal setting forth an interesting comparative-historical question and describing how the topic would be investigated, including an account of data sources and appropriate methodological tools, and identifying the most promising theoretical framework(s) for tackling the question.

You should speak with me about your final paper intentions by April 1 at the latest.

These three components—participation, exercises, and final paper—will comprise your grade in the following proportion:

- participation in class and memos (20%)
- the two short writing assignments (40% in total)
- term paper (40%)
Readings

Many of the required readings are posted on the course’s sakai website, or they are available for you to download through JSTOR or other online sources, as indicated below. The following books we will be consulting with enough frequency or in enough quantity to warrant purchasing them. Buy others only if you like.


Schedule of Classes

Week 1 (01/21)  
Introduction and Overview of the Course

Week 2 (01/28)  
Defining the Enterprise I: Taxonomy and Genealogy


Also relevant but not required:

James Mahoney and Dietrich Rueschemeyer, “Comparative Historical Analysis: Achievements and Agendas,” in Mahoney and Rueschemeyer, eds., *Comparative Historical Analysis in the Social Sciences* (Cambridge, 2003) (offers a more restrictive view of what defines comparative-historical research)
Larry Griffin, “How is Sociology Informed by History," Social Forces 73,4: 1245-54

Week 3 (02/04)  Defining the Enterprise II: Methodological Concerns
(Primarily About Comparison)

Read:  1) Charles Ragin, The Comparative Method: Moving Beyond Qualitative and Quantitative Strategies (California, 1987), chapters 3, 5-8

2) James Mahoney, “Strategies of Causal Assessment in Comparative Historical Analysis,” in Mahoney and Rueschemeyer, eds., Comparative Historical Analysis in the Social Sciences (Cambridge 2003), pp. 337-72


Some other relevant materials on comparative, negative case, and narrative methods, etc.:

Charles C. Ragin, Fuzzy-Set Social Science (Chicago, 2000)
Charles C. Ragin, Redesigning Social Inquiry: Fuzzy Sets and Beyond (Chicago, 2008)
Barbara Geddes, Paradigms and Sand Castles: Theory Building and Research Design in Comparative Politics (Michigan, 2003)
Alexander L. George and Andrew Bennett, Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences (MIT Press, 2005)
George Steinmetz, “Reflection on the Role of Social Narratives in Working Class Formation: Narrative Theory in the Social Sciences,” Social Science History 16, 3 (Fall 1989): 489-516
Week 4 (02/11)  The Debate over General Theory (and in Particular, Rational Choice)


5) Sica’s Critique of Mahoney, Mahoney’s Reply and Sica’s Rebuttal, Download at: https://socialforces.unc.edu/epub/rejoinders/index_html

Note: Assignment 1 will focus on the Week 4 readings. It will be distributed on or around February 8, and it will be due on or around February 16

Week 5 (02/18)  Thinking More About Temporality/ies


3) Paul Pierson, “Big, Slow-Moving, and ... Invisible: Macrosocial Processes in the Study of Comparative Politics,” in Mahoney and Rueschemeyer, eds., *Comparative Historical Analysis in the Social Sciences* (Cambridge 2003), pp. 177-207

Some other interesting material:


Alexander Gerschenkron, Economic Backwardness in Historical Perspective (Cambridge, 1962)


Frank Dobbin, Forging Industrial Policy: The United States, Britain, and France in the Railway Age (Cambridge, 1994)

Jeffrey Haydu, “Making Use of the Past: Time Periods as Cases to Compare and Sequences of Problem-Solving,” American Journal of Sociology 104: 339-71

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**Week 6 (02/25)**

**Considerations of Scope: (Very) Macro and (Very) Micro**


Also potentially of interest:


Week 7 (03/04) The Idea of Emergence

Read:


Also of interest:


Michael Mann, *Fascists* (Cambridge, 2004)


John F. Padgett, “Organizational Genesis in Florentine History: Four Multiple-Network Processes,” unpublished ms., selections


Walter Fontana and Leo Buss, “The Barriers of Objects: From Dynamical Systems to Bounded Organizations,” in John Casti et al. (eds.), *Boundaries and Barriers*


Manfred Eigen and Peter Schuster, *The Hypercycle: A Principle of Natural Self-Organization*

**Week 8 (03/11) Structures and Logics, Tools for Analysis**

Read: 1) John Levi Martin, *Social Structures* (Princeton, 2009), chapters 1, 6, and 9 [sakai]

2) Charles Tilly, *Durable Inequality* (California, 1998), chapter 3 [sakai]

3) Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments*, chapters 2 and 6 [sakai]

Some other material of interest:

Max Weber, *Economy and Society* (California, 1978), chapters 1, 3, 10, 11
Per Hage and Frank Harary, *Structural Models in Anthropology* (Cambridge, 1983)
Andrew Abbott, *Chaos of Disciplines* (Chicago, 2001)
Frans de Waal, *Chimpanzee Politics* (Johns Hopkins, 1982)
V. O. Key, *Southern Politics in State and Nation* (Tennessee, 1957)

**NO CLASS MARCH 18; RUTGERS SPRING BREAK**

Note: Assignment 2 will allow you to focus on the Week 9 or Week 10 readings. It will be distributed on or around March 22, and it will be due on or around April 6
Week 9 (03/25)  A Classic in the Field I: Barrington Moore

Read:  1) Barrington Moore, Jr., *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy* (Beacon, 1966), Part Three (pp. 413-508), and then chapter 3

2) James Mahoney, “Knowledge Accumulation in Comparative Historical Research: The Case of Democracy and Authoritarianism,” in Mahoney and Rueschemeyer, eds., *Comparative Historical Analysis in the Social Sciences* (Cambridge, 2003), pp. 131-74


Week 10 (04/01)  Classics in the Field II: States and Markets

Read:  1) Thomas Ertman, *Birth of the Leviathan: Building States and Regimes in Medieval and Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, 1997), chapter 1


A partial list of classic and/or recent works on state-formation and/or regime formation:

Karen Barkey, *Bandits and Bureaucrats: The Ottoman Route to State Centralization* (Cornell, 1994)
Sidney Tarrow, “From Comparative Historical Analysis to "Local Theory": The Italian City-State Route to the Modern State,” *Theory and Society* 33, 2 (April 2004): 443-71
And a handful of important works on market formation and the transition to capitalism:

Rosemary L. Hopcroft, Regions, Institutions, and Agrarian Change in European History (Michigan, 1999)
Rebecca Jean Emigh, “Economic Interests and Sectoral Relations: The Undevelopment of Capitalism in Fifteenth Century Tuscany,” American Journal of Sociology 1085: 1075-1113
Rebecca Jean Emigh, The Undevelopment of Capitalism: Sectors and Markets in Fifteenth-Century Tuscany (Temple, 2009)

And another huge topic, of course—revolutions:

Theda Skocpol, States and Social Revolutions (Cambridge, 1979)
Jack A. Goldstone, Revolution and Rebellion in the Early Modern World (California, 1991)
Nader Sohrabi, “Historicizing Revolutions: Constitutional Revolutions in the Ottoman Empire, Iran, and Russia, 1905-1908,” American Journal of Sociology 100, 6: 1383-1447
Nader Sohrabi, “Global Waves, Local Actors: What the Young Turks Knew About Other Revolutions and Why It Mattered,” Comparative Studies in Society and History 44, 1: 45-79
Jeff Goodwin, No Other Way Out: States and Revolutionary Movements, 1945-1991 (Cambridge, 2001)

Week 11 (04/08) Network Approaches in Historical Sociology

Read: 1) Roger V. Gould, “Uses of Network Tools in Comparative Historical Research,” in James Mahoney and Dietrich Rueschemeyer, eds., Comparative Historical Analysis in the Social Sciences (Cambridge, 2003), pp. 241-69


Also of interest:

Peter Bearman, James Moody, and Robert Faris, “Networks and History,” Complexity 8.1:61-71
Peter S. Bearman, Relations into Rhetorics (Transaction, 1993), especially pp. 1-18, 24-5, 42-5, 72-93, 95-111, 131-181
Roger V. Gould, Insurgent Identities (Chicago, 1995), especially chapters 1, 2, 6, 7
Mustafa Emirbayer and Jeff Goodwin, “Network Analysis, Culture, and the Problem of Agency,” *American Journal of Sociology* 99:1411-54
Paul D. McLean, “Patrimonialism and Elite Networks in Late Eighteenth Century Poland,” unpublished manuscript
John F. Padgett and Paul D. McLean, “Economic Credit in Renaissance Florence,” unpublished manuscript
Quentin Van Doosselaere, *Commercial Agreements and Social Dynamics in Medieval Genoa* (Cambridge, 2009)

### Week 12 (04/15)

**Cultural Explanations and Approaches (Kinda Broad)**


A smattering of other titles possibly of interest to you:

Eiko Ikegami, *The Taming of the Samurai* (Harvard, 1995)
Gilbert Shapiro and John Markoff, Revolutionary Demands: A Content Analysis of the Cahiers de doléances of 1789 (Stanford, 1998)
Richard Biernacki, *The Fabrication of Labor: Germany and Britain, 1640-1914* (California, 1995)

**Week 13 (04/22)  Empirical Applications of Rational Choice Arguments (Also Broadly Construed)**


Also of possible interest:


**Week 14 (04/29)  Doing it Different Ways: Comparative Approaches to the Themes of Colonialism and Empire**

Read: 1) George Steinmetz, “‘The Devil’s Handwriting:’ Precolonial Discourse, Ethnographic Acuity, and Cross-Identification in German Colonialism,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 45, 1 (2003): 41-95 [online]

3) Karen Barkey, *Empire of Difference: The Ottomans in Comparative Perspective* (Cambridge, 2008), selections

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