Comparative Historical Analysis in the Social Sciences:

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Course Goals

The central goal of this seminar is to enable students to construct, and to critique, methodologically sophisticated comparative-historical research projects, broadly defined, in the social sciences. To do so, we will explore the techniques, uses, strengths, and limitations of historical-causal, comparative and case study methods, while emphasizing the relationships among these methods, alternative methods, and contemporary debates in the philosophy of science. The research examples used to illustrate methodological issues will be drawn from examples in American, comparative and international politics, sociology, and economics.

The seminar will begin with a focus on the philosophy of science, theory construction, theory testing, causality, and causal inference: the nuts and bolts of social science. With this epistemological grounding, we will then explore core issues in comparative research design, including methods of structured and focused comparisons of cases, case selection and possible problems of bias, process tracing, the use of counterfactual analysis, and timing-sensitive and path-dependent analysis. Third, we will look at the assumptions, comparative strengths and weaknesses, and proper domain of comparative historical methods and alternative approaches, particularly statistical methods and formal modeling. Two or three special sessions, depending on class enrollment, will be devoted to student presentations of their research designs and constructive critiques of these designs by fellow seminar participants. Presumably, many students will choose to present a research design proposal for their dissertation, although students could also present a research design for an article or book chapter or the article or book chapter itself. Individual projects will take shape in consultation with me.

Requirements

Mastery of assigned readings and active participation in seminar discussions (30%). We will be tackling some of the toughest methodological and theoretical issues related to historical social science; coming to each session having read each of the assigned readings and prepared to address debates, lingering questions, fundamental problems, etc. within them is crucial. Let me be very clear: participation in class discussions accounts for 30% of the course grade and is not a “give-away.” One could earn perfect scores on all other assignments and still receive a grade of 70 (C) by not participating in seminar discussions.
Two short essays critiquing the assigned readings for two separate weeks (30%). Each student will be required to write two 1500-1800 word critiques of the assigned readings for any two weeks. These critiques can focus on one or several of the readings for the week, or on one or a few cross-cutting themes. They need not address all of the readings or discussion questions for a week.

Research Design or Seminar Paper and Presentation (40%). Students will be required to submit copies of a research design paper to all seminar participants one week in advance of presenting it in the seminar. Each student will present their design in the seminar for a constructive discussion by fellow participants, with a short introduction from the student and/or advance reading questions suggesting issues or methodological dilemmas upon which participants should focus.

Research designs should address the following tasks: 1) specification of the research problem, question and research objectives, in relation to the current stage of development and research needs of the relevant research program, related literatures, and alternative explanations; 2) specification of the independent and dependent variables (this will depend on the topic at hand); 3) selection of a historical case or cases that are appropriate in light of the first two tasks, and justification of why these cases were selected and others were not; 4) consideration of how variance in the variables can best be described for testing and/or refining existing theories; 5) specification of the data requirements, including both process tracing data and measurements of the independent and dependent variables for the main hypotheses of interest, including alternative explanations. There is no minimum length limit, though most papers will probably be around 7,000 words and should be shorter than 9,000 words.

Follow-up memo on refinement of the research design. While students are not expected to revise fully and resubmit their research designs by the end of the course, they will be required to submit a memo of about 1500 words on the modifications they think are necessary, and the dilemmas that are still unresolved, in light of the critique they received in the seminar.

Grading
30% mastery of the readings as evident through participation in class discussions
30% short essays
40% written research design, presentation of research design, and follow-up memo.

Required Books


James Mahoney and Dietrich Rueschemeyer, *Comparative Historical Analysis in the Social Sciences* (Cambridge, 2003).


**Course Outline and Readings**

1. **January 13. Course Introduction**

2. **January 20. Introduction to the Historical-Causal Worldview**


Terrence McDonald, “What We Talk About When We Talk About History: The Conversations of History and Sociology,” in McDonald, 91-118.

**I) Philosophy of Science and Epistemological Issues**

3. **January 27. Empiricism and Knowledge**

[http://eserver.org/18th/hume-enquiry.html](http://eserver.org/18th/hume-enquiry.html)

Carl Hempel, “The Function of General Laws in History,” in Martin and McIntyre, *Readings in*
the Philosophy of Social Science, 43-53.

Van Evera, Chapter 1.


Keohane, King, and Verba (hereafter KKV), Designing Social Inquiry, Chapter 1, section 3.5.


5. February 10. Causality, Explanation, and Causal Inference


Alan Zuckerman, “Reformulating Explanatory Standards and Advancing Theory in Comparative Politics,” in Mark Irving Lichbach and Alan S. Zuckerman, eds., Comparative

II) Case Study Methods

6. February 17. Designs for Single and Comparative Case Studies


Andrew Bennett and Alexander George, "Research Design Tasks," available at: http://www.georgetown.edu/bennett/RESDES.htm

Van Evera, Guide to Methodology, pp. 49-76.


7. February 24. Case Selection and Selection Bias

Designing Social Inquiry pp. 124-149.

Brady and Collier, Chapter 6.


Van Evera, Guide to Methodology, pp. 77-88.


Philip Tetlock and Aaron Belkin, eds., Counterfactual Thought Experiments, chapters 1, 12.


Bennett and George, “Process Tracing in Case Study Research,” available at: http://www.georgetown.edu/faculty/bennetta/PROTCG.htm

9. March 10. Path Dependence, Timing, and Sequence

Paul Pierson, Politics in Time, Chapters 1 and 2.


Some recommended readings:

Mahoney, James, The Legacies of Liberalism (Johns Hopkins, 2001) (CP)
Pierson, Paul, Dismantling the Welfare State (Cambridge, 1994) (AG)

10. March 24. Case Studies and "Macro Comparison" in Comparative Politics


Chapters 2, 4, 5, 8 in Mahoney and Rueschemeyer.
Recommended Readings:

**III) Case Studies and Alternative Methods:**
Comparative Advantages and Complementarities

12. April 7. Statistics and Formal Modeling: Contrasts and Complementarities with Case Studies

KKV, *Designing Social Inquiry*, sections 2.6 and 3.3.


14. April 21. Critiques and Justifications of Comparative Historical and Case Study Methods

KKV, *Designing Social Inquiry*, sections 2.2, 4.1, and Chapter 6.

Mahoney and Rueschemeyer, Chapter 1.


15. April 28. Critiques and Justifications Continued. (?)

Timothy McKeown, "Case Studies and the Statistical World View," in Brady and Collier (chapter 9).