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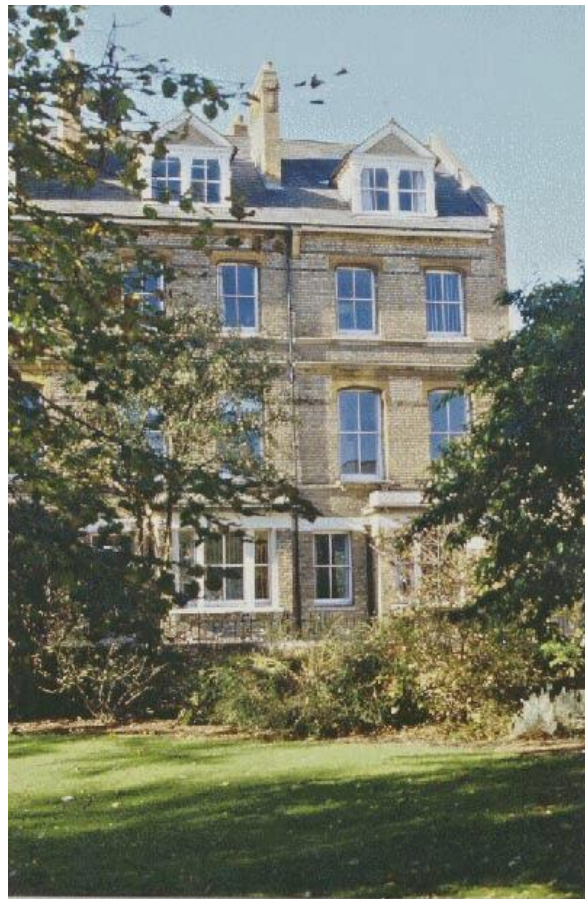
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The Politics of Social Policy: State of the Art

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Abstract:

Over the course of the past half a century, a vast amount of research has been undertaken on the welfare state comprising a wide range of theoretical perspectives and empirical traditions. However, exactly how such plurality should be regarded has been less than clear since there has notably been a lack of discourse within the field of comparative political economy with regard to possible ways in which the literature might be interpreted as a whole. As a result, relatively little attention has been given to how the manner in which existing conceptual and methodological approaches are analysed has shaped the way in which researchers analyse the welfare state. Consequently, there is a need to examine and compare the different strategies which have been employed to conceptualise and assess such analytical diversity. In particular, two main analytical approaches to the review of comparative political economy literature on the welfare state are identified, namely the critical method and the composite method. Both of these approaches have been employed to specify prospective frameworks of analysis through the survey and evaluation of previous scholarly contributions. In the analysis which follows an attempt is made to reconcile the conceptual and methodological plurality which has become characteristic of welfare state research with a view towards making the mechanics of both hypothesis testing and theory building more transparent and comprehensible.

Introduction

The development of the welfare state in advanced capitalist societies has become one of the most widely researched areas of comparative political and sociological study. However, despite the cumulative output of decades of extensive scholarship, a widespread and enduring consensus on the precise reasons for the emergence and growth of welfare states has yet to materialise. The canon of existing literature has instead been characterised by a collection of different schools of thought, each of which has posited its own particular theoretical framework to account for the establishment and expansion of welfare institutions within national political economies. The diversity of explanations and methods available can make it difficult to make sense of this corpus of literature as a whole, since it has been unclear as to exactly how the existence of such plurality should be interpreted. Moreover, reconciling this heterogeneity has been further hindered by the fact that relatively little guidance has been forthcoming within the sub-field with regard to how such a wide range of theoretical perspectives and methodological approaches might be holistically conceptualised. Although the question of theoretical pluralism has received considerable attention, particularly within the larger academic discourse over the disciplinary history and identity of political science, there has been no similar soul-searching within the sub-field of welfare state studies (see e.g. Finifter 1983; 1993; Weisberg 1986; Almond 1990; 1996). Consequently, whilst the prevailing inclination in post-behavioural political science has been towards the acceptance and even the embracement of intellectual variety, the tendency in welfare state scholarship has been decidedly more ambiguous in nature (see e.g. Dryzek and Leonard 1988; Dryzek et al. 1990; Farr and Seidelman 1993; Dryzek et al. 1995; Almond 1996: 83; Stoker and Marsh 2002: 3, 4; Gunnell 2005).

Assessing Approaches to the Review of the Welfare State Literature

According to Edwin Amenta (2003), the source of this diversity in the study of social policy has been rooted in an underlying dichotomy which has been present within the operational logic of welfare state research in which a consensus of analytical purpose has been contrasted with a divergence of analytical approach. Despite the pervasiveness of eclecticism within the sub-field, most theoretical propositions have in fact shared the same scholarly objective. The direction of the vast majority of empirical research on the welfare state from the 1950s until the

1990s has been informed by a common conceptualisation of the fundamental constitution of social policy and the basic composition of its study which Amenta (2003: 97) has referred to as 'the consensus on social policy'. As Amenta (op. cit.) has explained, the basis for this agreement has been the working assumption that social policy has been an instrument employed by the state to decrease disparities of income generated within a market capitalist society through the guarantee of minimum levels of economic well-being (op. cit.). The prevailing concurrence amongst scholars has been that the general purpose of government-administered social programmes has been to provide citizens with a baseline of insurance against a variety of commonly encountered occupational and life risks such as unemployment, disability, illness, work-related injury and old-age (Amenta 1993: 750; 2003: 97). Consequently, most theoretical analyses, regardless of their conceptual orientation, have tended to concentrate on the programmatic development of social insurance as well as on variations in cross-national trends of social expenditure (Janoski and Isaac 1994: 31; Amenta 2003: 97). Much of the reasoning which has underpinned both research agendas has rested on the notion that public policy has served as one of the major driving forces behind public sector growth in most industrialised economies between the late nineteenth and the late twentieth centuries (Cameron 1978; Tanzi and Schuknecht 2000). However, although there has been basic scholarly agreement regarding exactly what should be examined, there has also been a definite difference of opinion over how the agreed subject matter should be examined (Amenta 2003: 114).

Such discord in the way in which the study of the welfare state should be approached has inevitably produced a significant amount of conceptual and methodological variety and it is the recognition of this resulting plurality which serves as the point of departure for this review of the literature. Yet it is by no means sufficient that the existence of scholarly multiplicity be merely acknowledged as a reality of contemporary welfare state scholarship, as has been the case more broadly in the discipline of political science (Stoker and Marsh 2002: 3). Instead it is crucial that such diversity also be analytically reconciled since the manner in which previous scholarly contributions are engaged has the capacity to profoundly affect prospective agendas of empirical research. However, dealing with pluralism yields its own questions and concerns, most of which seem to be left directly unaddressed in the literature. At issue is whether theoretical and methodological diversity can help to facilitate the creation of a clearer and more comprehensive understanding of causality in the study of welfare state development and change or whether it actually detracts from the pursuit of that objective. Whilst the diversity of available approaches has certainly highlighted the underlying difficulty in distilling complex macro-social phenomena

into the systematised format of a single meta-theoretical framework, it should also be considered that the extent of this heterogeneity may also have served to undermine the clarity of analysis through which the dynamics of welfare institutions can be explored. The different approaches to literature review in welfare state research are reflective of this divided logic, ranging from those grounded in scientific unity and the promotion of a cohesive and coherent explanatory framework to those composed of varying degrees of conceptual and methodological variety.

The question of whether the examination of social policy development should best be informed by a single model or whether it would be better explained by drawing upon different theoretical and empirical traditions lies at the very heart of the dilemma faced by students of the welfare state in trying to make sense of this vast body of literature. Choosing between different explanatory accounts can be a fairly daunting prospect as it is all too often unclear which theoretical perspective and methodological approach one should necessarily apply to one's own research. For instance, it might well be justifiable to use a combination of established theoretical and methodological approaches in order to cherry-pick from each of the most attractive and applicable assertions which have previously been put forward. On the other hand, it might be equally appealing for one to decide to apply the most recently advanced explanation in order to place the theory and methodology of one's own research project at the cutting edge of current thought. However, the question arises as to whether either of these strategies is adequately dynamic enough for the construction of the type of sufficiently rigorous causal explanation necessary to account for developments and changes in welfare institutions. This chapter identifies two analytical strategies, namely the critical method and the composite method. Both of these approaches undertake an appraisal of previous scholarly contributions in order to build a suitable explanatory framework for prospective empirical research. However, the manner in which each of these methods engages with the literature is very different.

The critical method begins by conducting an evaluative review of existing welfare state explanations. Its primary objective is to assess the empirical basis of hypotheses in order to test their causal claims and in doing so, the critical method seeks out both methodological weaknesses and predictive inaccuracies. The purpose of this process is to identify a single analytical framework with the greatest explanatory power either derived from a selection of established approaches or, alternatively, from a more promising conceptual innovation. The composite method also critically evaluates the existing literature with a view towards positing a single explanation. Its focus is therefore also on the empirical substantiation of causal propositions. However, it significantly differs from the critical method in the way that it

ultimately constructs such a model. The purpose of the composite method is to assemble an amalgamated framework by focusing on the potential compatibility of apparently conflicting schools of thought. As a consequence, this approach attempts to uncover the ways in which different lines of argumentation from divergent theoretical accounts can complement each other in an effort to develop a more dynamic perspective than that drawn from any single conceptual source.

The Critical Method

One of the most comprehensive surveys of the major explanatory schools of thought used to account for welfare state development can be found in Theda Skocpol and Edwin Amenta's (1986) overview of state-centric and political institutional approaches to social policy formation. Although Skocpol and Amenta (op. cit.: 132) commence their analysis under the premise that contemporary research on the welfare state has been shaped by a significant degree of intellectual variety (op. cit.: 132), their primary focus ultimately lies in conducting an assessment of institutional theory rather than a consideration of conceptual and methodological plurality across the sub-field. Following an evaluation of the two main structural-functionalist schools, that of Industrialism and Neo-Marxism, they present a detailed review of the various approaches of political institutionalism. In doing so, they undertake a detailed and systematic review of the primary lines of argumentation which have been posited as well as the key literary sources comprising the corpus of each of these three theoretical influences. Skocpol and Amenta proceed by highlighting the various conceptual and empirical shortcomings of both Industrialism and structural-functional Neo-Marxism. In particular, they note that the centrality which both of these frameworks have tended to ascribe to economic determinants has meant that the significant role which democratic politics has played in the process of social policy formation has been considerably underestimated (op. cit.: 136). They explain that such an emphasis on economic functionalism has in turn prompted many scholars to explore the different institutional dynamics which have initiated, shaped and sustained certain social policy trajectories (op. cit.). It is from this point of departure that Skocpol and Amenta embark upon showcasing the scholarly contributions which state-centric and political institutional approaches have made in an effort to

underline the place of such research agendas at the forefront of inquiry into welfare state development.

Skocpol and Amenta's portrayal of social policy research as having been characterised by changing trends in theoretical argumentation and methodological approach has been highly influential on the way in which students of the welfare state have come to perceive plurality in the existing literature. This depiction has tended to reflect the general consensus that the field of social policy has been constituted by '...shifting orientations and methods of research' (op. cit.: 132). Moreover, it suggests that there has been a definite progression of choice in the approaches which scholars have elected to employ in their research. This perspective has been vividly articulated in Amenta's (1993: 752) overview of cross-comparative studies of social expenditure in which he has argued that the intellectual landscape of welfare state studies '...has often resembled a battlefield, with researchers sending waves of hypotheses across it, hoping to claim sovereignty for one theory or another'. In terms of theoretical accounts, the most likely conclusion from a reading of Skocpol and Amenta's (1986) survey would be that the theory of Industrialism had been superseded by structural-functional Neo-Marxism which had in turn been eclipsed by a new-institutionalism understanding of state-centrism. As far as Skocpol and Amenta seemed to be concerned, not only had structural-functional frameworks for analysis overlooked a major causal determinant of social policy formation, namely political institutions, but also neither the logic of Industrialism nor Neo-Marxist explanations had been successful in providing sufficiently rigorous empirical evidence to explain social policy developments. Consequently, in keeping with the norms of scientific method, it is appropriate that such hypotheses should be discarded.

There has been a related pattern of changing preferences in the area of methodological approach as well. According to Skocpol and Amenta, the informational value of the statistical analysis of large comparative sets of cross-national data on social expenditure, which have been used in numerous studies to underpin both Industrialism and Social Democratic explanations, has been eroded (Skocpol and Amenta 1986: 151). As a number of scholars have argued, measuring welfare state change can be difficult when examined over long periods of time. Such analyses have typically been quantitatively-oriented and, as a result, have tended to rely upon social expenditure data in order to draw cross-national comparisons. However, as Paul Pierson (2001: 421) has noted, this has been problematic since there have been significant data limitations. This point has also been vigorously voiced by Gøsta Esping-Andersen who has asserted that comparative analyses of cross-national social expenditure indices have been insufficient in

providing a useful indication of whether changes have occurred in a state's commitment to social policy obligations over time (op. cit.; Esping-Andersen 1992: 103; Esping-Andersen and Korpi 1987: 40). Whilst some additional insight might be gained from the employment of further quantitative examinations into the particular features of specific social programmes, it has been argued that the empirical approach perhaps best poised to inform inquiries into the development of welfare states has been that of a historically-grounded methodology rooted in historical-political and historical-sociological case studies (Skocpol and Amenta 1986: 151; Amenta 1993: 760). Whereas quantitative data has tended to be used in order to support single-variable arguments such as those used to support theses of Industrialism and Social Democracy, historically-based research should be capable of meeting the demands of multi-variable theories of causality such as those implicit in institutional and state-centric theories (Skocpol and Amenta 1986: 152). In this way, as Amenta (1993: 760) explains, comparative historical research would seem better poised than traditional quantitative methods to draw more specific connections between actors and interests.

The 'critical' or 'scientific assessment' approach that Skocpol and Amenta employ endeavours to conduct a systematic overview of key existing theories and methodologies in order to ultimately undertake a critical analysis of their conceptual and empirical credibility. In doing so, it seeks to question and challenge their capacity and competency to provide sufficiently robust and accurate evidence-based causal explanations. However, despite the apparent usefulness of this approach in the execution of scientific method, its functionality as a means for formulating a more comprehensive survey is far more questionable. Quite often such a critical evaluation of the literature will only include those explanations deemed as being most relevant to the forthcoming study. The exclusive tendencies seemingly inherent in such a scientifically oriented selection process would therefore seem to be quite problematic for the formulation of a more pluralistic view. By choosing only those frameworks which have held immediate pre-eminence, scholars inevitably neglect to include other important perspectives. For instance, whereas Skocpol and Amenta (1986) centred their theoretical critique on Industrialism and Neo-Marxism, the analytical scope of many recent reviews has tended to be narrower. Consequently, not only have these works often excluded structural-functionalist paradigms but they have frequently omitted institutional explanations as well. Instead many have tended to solely acknowledge power-resources as the dominant established theory (see e.g. Mares 2003: 4, 5; Iversen 2005: 7; Iversen and Stephens 2008).

It is this very pattern of shifting theoretical and methodological trends which has ultimately been responsible for somewhat limiting the long-term utility of Skocpol and Amenta's literature review itself. Written some twenty years ago, the scope of their survey has been effectively exceeded by the introduction of new explanations for welfare state development. As a consequence, the pertinence of their study as a comprehensive review of the literature has been partially compromised. An examination of the reasons for this points down two very different paths. The first of these is science with the second being pluralism. Either the progression of investigative analysis guides the field of social policy in the direction of a single explanatory framework through the application of scientific method or else it leads to an ever-increasing array of possible explanatory models. Thus, the matter which needs to be addressed is whether the scope of Skocpol and Amenta's survey has been surpassed since its publication simply because there is currently greater pluralism within the field or whether because the theories which they covered have become outmoded. The question which inevitably arises is where all this leaves the issue of theoretical and methodological diversity. One would naturally expect that if both established theories and methodologies could be challenged and eventually displaced by newer and supposedly more accurate paradigms of inquiry as scientific method dictates, then such plurality could hardly exist at all or, at the very least, it could not persist for very long. Instead, something more akin to a graveyard of past ideas would probably emerge, comprising the casualties of relentless and rigorous scientific scrutiny.

This notion might seem to be quite compatible with the logic put forward in Skocpol and Amenta's portrayal of plurality. Nevertheless, writing some seven years after the publication of Skocpol and Amenta's (1986) collaborative survey, Amenta independently noted that the door to theoretical and methodological variety had by no means been fully closed. As Amenta (1993: 752) has explained: 'No theory has yet won recognition as the sole legitimate solution, because proponents of theories that lose a test often claim that their ideas were unjustly undermined by unfair operationalizations or inappropriate analyses.' At an initial glance Amenta's comment might seem to be somewhat puzzling given that only a few years prior to making this observation he and Skocpol had themselves proceeded to provide a critical analysis of the principal weaknesses of structural-functionalism. After all, the fact that both Industrialism and Neo-Marxism had failed to effectively provide reliable evidence of empirical causality should have constituted a firm scientific basis upon which to discredit the explanatory and predictive propositions that they had advanced, irrespective of any possible protestations from maligned theorists. Nevertheless, when one considers Amenta's (1993) observation in light of Skocpol

and Amenta's (1986) approach to theoretical and methodological multiplicity, it is possible to begin to construct a clearer picture of exactly how such diversity has frequently been considered by scholars in the field. A contradiction in the employment of scientific method becomes apparent and even though a given causal explanation may indeed undergo rigorous scientific scrutiny, conclusions from such an analysis may not necessarily be universally accepted.

The Composite Method

For those without a conceptual innovation to hand, those who are entirely unconvinced by any single explanatory framework or for those who find value in different existing theories, the composite method can perhaps prove to be the best possible solution for a scientific analysis of the existing literature. One of the greatest appeals of this approach is its flexibility since it enables scholars to freely survey and engage with the scholarship in a way which is far less restrictive than that encouraged through the employment of a strictly critical methodology. Rather than placing an exclusive focus on undermining the viability of established arguments, the composite method places a greater emphasis on the identification of conceptual utility derived from an array of approaches. However, far from undertaking a discursive narrative review, the composite method, like the critical method, commences with a critical evaluation of the literature. What truly distinguishes it from the critical method is that the explanatory model which it ultimately constructs is itself drawn from a variety of the perspectives under review. Yet the composite method has been infrequently employed in the survey of welfare state literature. This can probably be attributed to the emphasis which many researchers have placed on identifying single variable causality. Such a focus has left a significant amount of neglected literature which researchers have increasingly ceased to engage with as inquiry into the determinants of welfare states has progressed. It is this void which the composite method has the potential to fill through the synthesis of different ideas taken from what have all too often been perceived as being 'competing' accounts of social policy formation.

One of the rare examples of a review of welfare state theory and methodology to have actively used the composite method is Hannu Uusitalo's (1984) survey of comparative research. Uusitalo's main argument is that the degree of contrast which has typically characterised the conceptual and empirical distance separating existing welfare state explanations has been far too

extreme. According to Uusitalo (op. cit.: 404), much of what divides theories of welfare state development can be attributed to certain underlying differences both in their conceptual portrayal as well as in the terms of measurement and analysis which have informed their respective methodological approaches. As a consequence, comparative welfare state research has been characterised by several unnecessary disparities both in terms of the theoretical assertions that different schools of thought have made as well as with regard to the empirical results which they have each presented to support those claims. It is Uusitalo's belief that the extent to which these frameworks have been seen to stand in opposition to each other cannot be entirely justified when one considers more objectively the fundamental realities of social policy formation. As a result, he argues that far from being competing explanatory accounts, many of the causal propositions which have originated from supposedly rival lines of argumentation can actually be consolidated into a single framework. In this spirit, Uusitalo proceeds to assemble what he refers to as a 'general model' of welfare state development through which disparate existing research efforts can be effectively incorporated into a single and unified explanation (op. cit.). It is from this point of departure that Uusitalo commences a critical review of the theoretical arguments and empirical findings in the literature with a view towards constructing an amalgamated approach through which the underlying processes of welfare state development can be more comprehensively understood.

Uusitalo's concerns regarding the lack of conceptual and methodological consistency between comparative studies of the welfare state have been shared by a number of other scholars. Frequently referred to as the 'state of the art' literature, such reservations have come to form a substantial sub-set of scholarship within the literature (Uusitalo 1984; Amenta 1993; Kersbergen 1995: 9). In addition to these contributions, many scholars have ascribed the problem of poor empirical comparability in welfare state studies to the different ways in which fundamental terms of analysis have been conceptualised (see e.g. Wilensky et al. 1985: 1; Wilensky 2002: 212; O'Connor and Brym 1988; Kersbergen 1995: 9). According to these examinations, a significant number of the contradictory findings which have characterised successive comparative quantitative studies of welfare state determinants have had their roots in the different ways in which researchers have chosen to methodologically approach data analysis. As Uusitalo (1984: 405) and Wilensky (2002: 212) have both argued, cross-national analyses have frequently varied in the selection criteria which they have used to choose the size and characteristics of their respective country samples. Whilst some studies have assembled very large cross-national samples which have included developed and developing countries alike

(Cutright 1965; Wilensky 1975; Amenta 2003: 110), others have limited sample size by placing an exclusive focus on advanced industrialised democracies predominantly in Western Europe, North America and the Antipodes as well as the case of Japan (Hewitt 1977; Stephens 1979; Castles 1982; Uusitalo 1984: 405; Amenta 1993: 750, 751; 2003: 110; Wilensky 2002: 212). The employment of such different operational approaches has resulted in significant variations in the quantitative results derived. Larger samples which incorporate a wider range of countries possessing greater economic diversity will inevitably have more statistical variance than smaller samples comprised solely of advanced capitalist nations whose economic development is broadly more comparable (Uusitalo 1984: 405). Similar statistical discrepancies can be found between those studies which have analysed country data through cross-sectional comparisons between countries and those which have conducted time series analyses focusing on the temporal progression of individual country data.

Another equally important area which has encouraged divergent empirical findings has concerned independent and dependent variable selection (Wilensky 2002: 212). Some researchers have preferred to focus on 'welfare efforts' defined in terms of large-scale social expenditure where such spending has been viewed as the proportion of national GDP directed towards the support of social programmes (Uusitalo 1984: 407; Wilensky et al. 1985: 5; Amenta 1993: 751; 2003: 110). The concept of welfare 'effort' has therefore been used as a proxy to indicate the presence of institutionalised welfare within a country's political economy as measured in fiscal terms. However, as Wilensky et al. (1985) have noted, researchers have tended to operationalise welfare 'effort' quite differently. Some have used per capita social expenditure as '...a measure of cash and services delivered to people by the government...' as the principal criteria for dependent variable selection (op. cit.: 5). In contrast, others have interpreted dependent variable measurements in relation to more specific 'welfare outcomes' such as income inequality, re-distributive factors, social mobility and various indicators of personal well-being (Uusitalo 1984: 407). According to Wilensky (et al. 1985: 5; 2002: 212), other variables which have been used in cross-national analyses have also included '...sector spending, particular social and labor-market policies, program initiation, program expansion...' as well as '...economic level, age of a system or program duration, age of population, or other correlates of affluence...'. Additional definitional discrepancies have had further repercussions on empirical results, such as the precise specifications of variable categories. An example of this is the quantitative analysis of party representation in government. Many studies have either not used the same political parties in their respective operational definitions of right and left political

affiliation or they have not categorised their political orientation in the same way (see e.g. Hewitt 1977; Uusitalo 1984: 409; Wilensky et al. 1985: 27, 28). In particular, as Wilensky et al. (1985: 26) explain, such divergences have usually hinged upon exactly how narrowly or broadly scholars have considered the notion of political ideology. As a consequence, there inevitably have been discrepancies between studies in which there has been an overemphasis on the political power of either right or left parties. Thus, there has been a tendency for such studies to generate notably different empirical outcomes even though they have been dealing with the very same broad kinds of analytical factors.

Although a number of efforts have been made to attempt to reconcile such methodological discrepancies,¹ conceptual discordance has also been evident in the theoretical literature which has been characterised by competing explanatory frameworks. According to Uusitalo (1984: 409), basic methodological irreconcilabilities have been further compounded by the different ways in which empirical findings have been construed within divergent theoretical interpretations. One of Uusitalo's primary points in this regard is that many traditionally rival accounts of the welfare state have in fact shared a greater degree of conceptual and empirical commonality than has typically been acknowledged. Wilensky's (1975; et al. 1985: 9 – 12; 2002) position on the matter has been quite similar, arguing that such practices have been intellectually divisive for the explanation of welfare state development. In accordance with the concept of convergence theory, Wilensky (2002: 211, 212) has been a particularly strong critic of the analytical polarity which Skocpol and Amenta² identified as being such a defining feature of the existing literature. As Wilensky (op. cit. 212) has argued, it has been the employment of these differing operationalisations and interpretations that has created distinctive 'warring "camps"' of explanatory theses and which has in turn succeeded in masking the existence of 'convergent findings' and 'complementary theories' within comparative welfare state research as a whole. In doing so, he has suggested that there is a conceptual and empirical basis upon which Amenta's (1993: 752) imagery of a 'battlefield' of ideas can be effectively transcended.

In initiating his composite approach, Uusitalo (1984: 409) identifies those propositions and findings which could best be considered to possess 'a sound empirical basis'. By combining the most empirically substantive of these assertions, it is reasoned that a coherent framework can be fashioned the constituent parts of which can be scientifically substantiated. In order for this to be achieved a sequential chain of causal events is constructed. To begin with, Uusitalo (op. cit.)

¹ See e.g. O'Connor (1988); O'Connor and Brym (1988); Korpi (1989); Pampel and Williamson (1989); Hicks and Swank (1992); Huber et al. (1993); Huber and Stephens (1993); Janoski and Hicks (1994b).

² See e.g. Skocpol & Amenta (1986: 132); Amenta (1993: 752).

point to 'economic level' as the foundational factor which has underpinned welfare state development. According to Uusitalo (op. cit.: 410), statistical evidence has been particularly compelling in demonstrating that there has been a powerful causal relationship between historic levels of economic growth and the expansion of the welfare state within individual industrialised countries over time, as shown in time-series analyses. However, whilst 'economic level' may indeed explain the broadest demands, requirements and capacities which societies have for the development of social policies, it does relatively little to enlighten our collective understanding as to why welfare efforts, welfare outcomes and welfare institutions have varied considerably between affluent nations. Anticipating the inevitable limitations of the causal link which may exist between economic level and institutional welfare, Uusitalo also looks towards incorporating additional variables such as the functional factor of 'economic structure', thereby establishing a wider basis upon which to assemble his 'general model'.

According to Uusitalo's model, it has been from these two underlying preconditions that other more direct determinants of social policy formation have arisen. The advent of the Industrial Revolution initiated dramatic demographic transformations such as urbanisation, population growth, increased longevity and declining rates of fertility (op. cit.: 411). The resulting changes in both labour market conditions and social structure served as an important catalyst for the formation of modern class structure. This was subsequently followed by the political mobilisation of the working classes which led to increased pressure for the modernisation of national political institutions, culminating in the introduction and extension of democratisation (op. cit.). As Uusitalo (op. cit.) has argued, it was through the emergence of democratic institutionalism that the role of political decision-making became a key factor in the process of social policy formation, establishing the legislative mechanisms necessary for the creation of public social spending. Political decision-making therefore serves as the most immediate causal determinant of social policies through the enactment of legislative initiatives. Having formulated a basic explanatory framework of welfare state development, each of the different schools of thought which inform the causal determinants identified are then divided into three separate theoretical groupings. Accordingly, industrialisation and economic structure are both categorised as structural-functionalist theories, class structure and worker mobilisation as structural-political theories and political structure and political decision-making as political theories. Consequently, it can be discerned that the sequential chain of causal determinants represented in Uusitalo's 'general model' can be expressed as a three-tiered process of events. Beginning with the necessary structural-functional prerequisites, welfare state development has

therefore hinged on the impetus of those structural-political forces which such preconditions brought into being and which were themselves ultimately responsible for shaping not only new forms of political institutionalism but also new demands for political action. However, when one examines the relationship between these three determinants more closely, the ultimate centrality given to the structural-political factors of class and worker mobilisation is distinctly noticeable. Whilst this model may indeed imply that industrialisation and economic structure have served as an essential platform upon which the welfare state has been built and that political decisions have directly effected social legislative outcomes, it also appears to imply that the bulk of the agency involved in creating institutionalised welfare lies predominantly with the principal structural-political determinants concerned.

Comparative Historical Analysis

Much of the comparative political economy literature has been profoundly informed by the use of ‘comparative historical analysis’ in the study of the historical development of welfare institutions (see e.g. Pierson 2000: 808 – 812; Mahoney and Rueschemeyer 2003a). Whilst the comparative approach has been an enduring feature of modern historical scholarship evident in the work of Adam Smith, Alexis de Tocqueville, Karl Marx, Max Weber and Marc Bloch (Mahoney and Rueschemeyer 2003b: 3), a renewal of interest in comparative historical method as an essential methodological framework for the analysis of macro-social phenomena in the social sciences dates from the mid-1960s (Skocpol 2003: 407, 408). Representative of the post-war renaissance of this methodology have been the works of Reinhard Bendix (1964; 1978), Barrington Moore Jr. (1966), Seymour Martin Lipset and Stein Rokkan (1968), Charles Tilly (1975) as well as Juan Linz (1978). Further extended by Theda Skocpol (1979: 33, 34) as a formalised approach in her study of the macro-causal determinants of cross-national social revolutions, the resurgence of comparative historical methodology and its emphasis on ‘small-N’ analyses developed as a reaction to the perceived limitations of ‘large-N’ studies which dominated comparative work throughout this period (Ragin 1987: vii, 53; Skocpol 2003: 407, 412).

It was at this time that comparative social research became increasingly divided into two opposing methodological schools of thought, namely those of qualitative analysis and of quantitative analysis (King et al. 1994: 3; Englestad and Mjøset 1997: xii). Whilst quantitative

research has centred upon ‘variable-oriented’ studies, qualitative research has centred upon ‘case-oriented’ studies (Rueschemeyer 1991; Ragin 1994). Originally posited by Adam Przeworski and Henry Teune (1970: 29, 30), the idea of a variable-oriented approach was itself born out of a critique of historical holism, the proponents of which argued that in order for social systems to be properly studied they necessarily had to be examined on their own terms as individual and complete entities. Przeworski and Teune sought to challenge this view by contending that the names of specific nations should be substituted by more general variables for which comparable values could be assigned. It was only through the establishment of such terms that national cases could actually become comparable in nature since national units did not inherently possess a shared basis upon which they could be systematically assessed (op. cit.: 10). However, despite providing a clear foundation for comparison, the variable-oriented approach also restricted the kinds of research questions which comparativists could pursue. As Charles Ragin (1987: 11) has explained, a growing interest in the dynamics of important historical outcomes and the holistic complexity of the societal features which have shaped them has had profound methodological ramifications for qualitative research agendas. The constraints associated with the variable-oriented research design have meant that many comparativists have sought to re-engage with national cases as distinct macro-social wholes within which the interaction of an array of variables or characteristics can be analysed (Ragin and Zaret 1983). Consequently, as Ragin (1991: 1, 2; 1997: 30) has asserted, a renewed emphasis has been placed upon conducting case-oriented studies through which national or societal cases would not simply be used ‘...to place boundaries around the measurement of variables...’ but which would themselves be conceptualised as ‘...meaningful but complex configurations of events and structures.’

The prevailing wisdom which predominated during the 1960s and 1970s had stipulated that for scientific method to be most effectively applied to social inquiry, a large sample size (N) was needed from which universal conclusions could be drawn (Skocpol 1979: 33). It was argued that only through a large-N approach could testable generalisations, supported by a sufficiently broad base of empirical observations, be derived from the rigorous application of multivariate statistical analysis (op. cit.). However, in order to meet these requirements, both theoretical propositions and empirical data had to conceptually and methodologically conform to a large-N framework. As Peter Hall (2003: 377) explains, the emergence of the ontological development of ‘scientific generalisation’³ in comparative politics during the 1950s and 1960s fundamentally

³ See e.g. Nagel (1961); Popper (1961); Hempel (1965); Kuhn (1970).

shaped the research questions which scholars were apt to ask, the methodological frameworks they typically employed and the empirical inferences which they ultimately made. Indicative of the logic of this approach was Sidney Verba's (1967: 113, 114) notion of 'disciplined' and 'configurative' inquiry which called for the transcendence of the particularities of individual polities through the identification of universal sets of similarities and differences between political systems. As a result, theory-building in comparative politics largely centred around the development of 'grand theory' as a basis for broadly-based cross-national comparisons in which concepts and variables could be applied across a wide-range of individual country cases (Thelen and Steinmo 1992: 4). Representative of this research agenda were theories of 'development' and 'modernisation' which used the concept of 'societal differentiation' to account for macro-trends in the development of social and political systems (Parsons 1964; 1966; Almond 1965; Almond and Powell 1966; Levy 1966). Modernisation theory was premised on the idea that all societies throughout the world were on an 'evolutionary' trajectory toward structural-functional maturation. An example of this theoretical tradition was Wilensky's 'industrialisation'⁴ thesis of welfare state development, which argued that there was evidence for increasing 'convergence' in social provision between industrialised and industrialising societies (Thelen and Steinmo 1992: 4).

Such theoretical trends were also related to concurrent ontological developments, namely the rise of 'structural-functionalism' (see e.g. Merton 1949; Parsons 1951; Easton 1953; Almond 1956; 1970; Rustow 1957). The prevalence of structural-functional explanations such as modernisation theory re-oriented the focus of comparative political study away from the role of formal institutions such as the state and towards ever more generic conceptions of the underlying and necessary 'functions' which were believed to shape all political systems regardless of societal context (Mair 1996: 314, 315). According to Ragin (1987: vii), researchers were therefore less likely to pursue narrower lines of investigation which related specific causal mechanisms to particular social outcomes and were instead more likely to incorporate such specified dynamics into broader categories of social phenomena from which a wider number of data points could be analysed. For instance, as Skocpol (1979: 34) discusses, many scholars interested in the causal issues relating to social revolutions had given relatively limited attention to the direct examination of such events in their own right, preferring instead to focus on larger structural-functional or behavioural categories such as 'relative deprivation', 'political violence' and 'collective action' into which the study of social revolutions could effectively be collapsed.

⁴ See e.g. Wilensky and Lebeaux (1958); Cutright (1965); Wilensky (1975); Wilensky (2002).

As a result of this universal emphasis, the explanatory categories used in structural-functional research grew increasingly more vague and as a consequence, they became increasingly ineffective as tools for the study of actual social phenomena (Hall 2003: 379).

Concerns over the use of ‘grand theory’ and ‘abstracted empiricism’ had emerged as early as the late 1950s within the discipline of sociology, voiced by C. Wright Mills (1959) in his critique of the extrapolation of specific quantitative studies in the creation of universally applied social generalisations. By the beginning of the 1970s, similar reservations regarding structural-functionalism and excessive generalisation had begun to gain momentum in comparative politics as well. As Verba (1971) acknowledged, there was a definite need to find a balance between the use of broadly conceived applications and the individual contextual characteristics of the cases involved. This position was echoed by Alexander George (1979) in his prescription for ‘structured’ and ‘focused’ comparison which, as in the case of Verba’s model, tried to reconcile contextual specificity within a framework for overarching causal patterns (George and Bennett 2005: 67 – 70). In response to such problems, Giovanni Sartori (1970; 1984) raised the importance of concept ‘validity’. According to Sartori (*op. cit.*), comparativists needed to be more conscious of ‘misformation’ in the categorisation of explanatory concepts. As he argued, a broad comparison of cases had the potential to be highly problematic because of the tendency to both widen concept ‘extension’ and reduce concept ‘intension’ along the conceptual ‘ladder of abstraction’ (Sartori 1970 : 1038, 1041). Since the diverse reality of social dynamics inevitably demanded ‘detailed knowledge’, researchers engaged in scientific generalisation and structural-functional explanation could be prone to force cases to fit established conceptual frameworks through the use of ‘conceptual stretching’ (*op. cit.*: 1034). Whilst the abstract nature of structural-functional variables enabled greater geographical coverage or ‘travelling’, as Sartori put it, it also necessarily meant the sacrifice of analytical accuracy and specificity (*op. cit.*: 1035). However, as David Collier and James Mahon (1993: 852) have shown, a strict interpretation of the ‘classical’ categorisation principle can also lead to the neglect of potentially significant variables derived from ‘family resemblance’ and ‘radical’ categories of concepts.

Sartori’s critique of the processes leading to conceptual formation would deeply inform the logic of Skocpol’s main criticism against the large-N approach, namely that in its quest to create sufficiently large sets of cases, large-N studies concomitantly reduced the explanatory power of the categories they produced (Skocpol 1979: 34). As a result, the more general causal mechanisms became, the less effective they would be in explaining why certain social outcomes developed in the way they did. The reaction of many historians to the large-N model was to reject its overly diffuse social scientific explanations in favour of individual case studies which

could be respectively understood within their own particular historical context. However, in searching for a middle ground, Skocpol (op. cit.: 35) argued that the conceptual and empirical problems evident in both quantitatively based generalisation and pure historical particularism could be largely resolved through the use of comparative historical analysis. As Skocpol has pointed out, this method was uniquely placed since it could combine both the theoretical generalisation of large-N research with a sensitivity for historical contexts, thereby providing a 'middle way' (op. cit.; Kohli et al. 1995: 45). As James Mahoney and Dietrich Rueschemeyer (2003b: 11) have explained, whilst the study of 'historical sociology' may also include 'interpretive' analyses of social phenomena and whilst studies of 'historical institutionalism' frequently vary in their use of comparative method, the focus of comparative historical analysis is firmly focused on the comparative explanation of historically-generated macro-social outcomes. It is this underlying approach to social phenomena which differentiates comparative historical analysis from other influential social scientific frameworks. When viewed in terms of the wider spectrum of approaches to comparative politics, comparative historical analysis therefore clearly occupies the middle ground of macro-social inquiry between rational choice theory on the one hand and post-modernist interpretation on the other (Kohli et al. 1995: 2, 3, 45; Katznelson 1997: 84, 85).

Recent conceptualisations of the foundational philosophy of the social sciences have prescribed two principal directions, aside from normative lines of questioning, for the analysis of social phenomena, namely those of interpretation and explanation (Little 1991: 68). Whilst the interpretive approach to social inquiry attempts to decipher and understand the significance of human behaviour by examining its role and meaning in specific social contexts, the purpose of the explanatory approach is to explain the occurrence of such activity by determining its causation through the description and generalisation of the causal processes involved (op. cit.: 68; Von Wright 1971: 5, 6). It is this emphasis on the fundamental role of causality which distinguishes both comparative historical analysis and rational choice theory as explanatory rather than interpretive models for macro-social inquiry (Mahoney and Rueschemeyer 2003b: 11; Little 1991: 39). However, the causal assumptions which inform both of these explanatory frameworks differ dramatically from one another. Whilst rational choice theorists have argued that the personal decisions of utility-maximising actors serve as the ultimate causal determinants of aggregate social consequences (Arrow 1951; Downs 1957; Olson 1965; Little 1991: 39 – 44; Green and Shapiro 1994: 13 – 16), comparative analytical historians have viewed such outcomes as the result of the 'cumulative causes' of unfolding historical patterns (Pierson 2003: 181, 182; 2004: 82, 83). Consequently, whilst rational choice emphasises the salience of the direct agency

of individual and group behaviour in the development of social dynamics, historical macro-analysis endeavours to highlight the way in which historical processes influence and qualify the scope of individual and group action.

According to Mahoney and Rueschemeyer (2003b: 10), what makes comparative historical analysis a distinctive methodological approach is its concern with three foundational undertakings, the appraisal and explanation of complex causal mechanisms, the analysis of long-term historical processes and the ‘systematic and contextualized comparison’⁵ of selected case studies. The underlying logic for such an approach was outlined in greater detail by Theda Skocpol and Margaret Somers (1980) in their study of comparative historical methodology in which they identified three primary typologies including ‘parallel demonstration of theory’, ‘contrast of contexts’ and ‘macrocausal analysis’. Whilst the ‘parallel demonstration of theory’ approach aims to establish the applicability of a theoretical proposition across a wide-range of historical cases, the ‘contrast of contexts’ approach looks to highlight unique aspects which distinguish different cases from each other (op. cit.: 176 – 178). However, ‘macro-causal analysis’ differs from both of these methods in that its main objective is one of causal inference in the explanation of long-term large social processes (op. cit.: 181). It is from Skocpol and Somers’s (1980) notion of the comparative study of macro-causal historical events that Mahoney and Rueschemeyer (2003b: 11) largely base their interpretation of comparative historical analysis and upon which each aspect of this approach, including causality, history and comparison, has been subsequently developed and elaborated.

Although comparative historical analysis has its roots in a number of intellectual sources, the logic of the ‘comparative method’ has been particularly influential. Whilst there had been an increase in work on the comparative method since the mid-1960s (see e.g. Kalleberg 1966; Merritt and Rokkan 1966; Verba 1967), especially in the field of international studies, it was Arend Lijphart’s (1971) seminal article which truly brought this approach into mainstream comparative politics (Collier 1991: 8; Hall 2003: 380). Lijphart (1971: 682) identified four ‘basic scientific methods’, including the ‘experimental’, the ‘statistical’, the ‘case study’ as well as the ‘comparative’. His assessment of each of these methods was based both on their respective capacity to evaluate different explanatory theories as well as on data collection considerations. For instance, even though the experimental method could facilitate rigorous hypothesis testing, its utility in social inquiry was nearly non-existent since suitable experimental data could seldom be derived from social phenomena (op. cit.: 683, 684). Considering its

⁵ See e.g. Thelen and Locke (1995).

inherent impracticability, an alternative was therefore needed which could effectively engage with the kinds of data that could be successfully extracted from the social world. Consequently, in lieu of the efficient variable control afforded by the experimental method, Lijphart (op. cit.) argued that the statistical method could provide the next best option (Hall 2003: 380). In this way, it could be used to achieve the ‘...conceptual (mathematical) manipulation of empirically observed data - which cannot be manipulated situationally as in experimental design – in order to discover controlled relationships among variables.’ (Lijphart: 684). However, not all areas of social inquiry were necessarily suitable for statistical analysis since not all could generate the large numbers of cases which this methodological approach required. As Lijphart (op. cit.: 685) noted, this was particularly true of studies conducted in the field of comparative politics where cases would typically be based upon ‘national political systems’, the use of which would naturally limit the number of potential observations that could be examined. Originally viewed as a subsidiary methodology to the large-N quantitative research design (Collier 1998: 1; Mahoney and Rueschemeyer 2003b: 16), Lijphart argued that the defining difference between the statistical and comparative methods was not in the logic of their approach but was rather in the number of cases which they analysed. Whilst the statistical method was necessarily applied to large numbers of cases, the comparative method was to be used in situations in which the number of cases was ‘...too small to permit systematic control by means of partial correlation’ (Lijphart 1971: 684). According to Lijphart, small-N studies could include as few as two and as many as twenty observations.

As in the case of the large-N quantitative research design, widespread attention has been paid to the shortcomings of the small-N paradigm. The cardinal drawback most associated with the comparative method, later to be formally termed the ‘small-N problem’ (Goldthorpe 1997: 5), was that it presented too many variables with too few corresponding cases for analysis (Lijphart op. cit.: 685). Lijphart (op. cit.: 686 – 690) responded to this issue by outlining three principal strategies through which such a discrepancy could be resolved; these included using comparable or matching cases, expanding the number of cases and decreasing the number of variables (Collier 1991: 15). Support for the latter two options has come from King et al. (1994: 119 – 123) who have advocated the employment of such methods as an effective response to the small-N problems of ‘more inferences than observations’ and ‘multicollinearity’. However, the basis for King et al.’s (1994) endorsement of case expansion and variable reduction would seem to derive, as Timothy McKeown (1999: 161) has pointed out more generally, from their decidedly statistical approach to the role of causal inference in qualitative research.

In contrast, the prevailing tendency in comparative historical research has long been to favour the use of ‘comparable’ or ‘differentiated’ cases as an alternative to either statistical or experimental control. Based on John Stuart Mill’s (1843/1974) ‘method of agreement’ and ‘method of difference’ (Ryan 1987: 48 – 52), these approaches have also occasionally been known as ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ comparative methods (Smelser 1973: 52; George and Bennett 2005: 153). Whilst the former emphasised case agreement in the event that a particular phenomenon and its corresponding causal factors could be concurrently identified in a selected number of cases, the latter sought to contrast selected cases from each other in the event that a particular phenomenon and its corresponding causal factors were absent from each case presented for analysis (Skocpol 1984b: 378). In this way, the presence of a causal relationship between two variables could be discovered in one of two ways. It could either be observed in cases that were alike in all aspects aside from the particular independent and dependent variable combination chosen or it could otherwise be found in cases that diverged in all aspects aside from the prospective relationship between those variables (Hall 2003: 379). Elaborated upon in the work of Neil Smelser (1968; 1976), Mill’s methods became increasingly applied in comparative political research in order to control for causal variation between different cases by determining those observations which possessed explanatory validity from those that were deemed to be invalid (Skocpol 1984b: 378; Hall 2003: 379). As Thomas Janoski and Alexander Hicks (1994b: 10) have explained, the application of a Millsean methodology has therefore necessarily been responsible for restricting a researcher’s selection of both country cases and potential historical periods of inquiry.

Although both approaches are often used in conjunction with one another, there has consistently been a difference of opinion regarding their respective merits. The argument for basing research upon comparable cases was taken forward by Lijphart who by the mid-1970s had begun to advocate the comparison of a few systematically and suitably matched cases (Lijphart 1975). Whilst a focus upon case similarity might well have undermined efforts to expand the number of cases being analysed, it nevertheless provided a much needed control otherwise lacking in most non-statistical research designs. As Przeworski and Teune (1970: 32) have explained, a ‘most similar systems’ design had become popular in the social sciences because of its ability to aid in variable reduction since similar economic, cultural and political features could effectively cancel each other out. However, the overall explanatory power of the ‘most similar systems’ design remained questionable since ‘carefully matched’ systems could also fail to sufficiently reject competing explanatory propositions, thus resulting in theoretical ‘overdetermination’ (Collier 1991: 16, 17). In response to such fundamental shortcomings,

Przeworski and Teune argued for the use of a ‘most different systems’ design through which universal causal commonalities could be derived from a diversity of cases (op. cit.: 17). In terms of its experimental utility, the method of difference far outweighed that of the method of agreement. According to Ragin (1987: 41), what truly distinguished Mill’s differentiated methodology was its use of negative cases to support the identification of positive cases. Whilst the method of agreement focused exclusively upon those instances where a particular phenomenon could be recognised, the method of difference could help to confirm the validity of such positive cases by demonstrating the non-existence of such a phenomenon in other comparable cases.

However, despite the importance of Mill’s original ‘canons’ in comparative social research, both methods have widely been seen to be ill-suited for reconciling more complex sets of causal relationships (op. cit.: 42). Indeed, even Mill himself had serious reservations about the respective capacity of either the method of agreement or the method of difference to convincingly relate cause to effect (op. cit.: 37, 40). Given the fact that most social outcomes were likely to be causally complex, Mill questioned whether the principle of causal elimination which both methods employed could be feasibly operationalised in many cases of social inquiry (George and Bennett 2005: 154). As George and Bennett (op. cit.) have explained, since Mill’s methods were founded upon very specific ontological suppositions, their own methodological approach tended to only successfully function under certain defined conditions. According to this set of criteria, not only must a particular outcome be the result of a single and consistently recurring causal determinant, but each prospective variable under examination must also be identified at the outset of analysis (op. cit.: 155). In addition, all known instances of such causal interactions must be presented for systematic assessment in order to ensure rigorous and effective variable control. However, such methodological constraints have also significantly limited the kinds of causal relationships that researchers have been prepared to investigate and, as a consequence, Mill’s methods have predominantly been used to account for ‘single-cause hypotheses’ in which direct and regular independent and dependent variable outcomes can be identified (op. cit.). The need for a more dynamic methodological response was highlighted by Ragin (1987) who cast doubt on the ability of such traditional methods to successfully reconcile instances of ‘multiple’ or ‘conjunctural’ causation. Ragin (op. cit.: 42) has argued that whilst a Millsean approach might be effective in ascertaining ‘patterns of constant association’, neither strategy was equipped to engage with instances of causal variation, especially those which were apt to take shape over an extended period of time or those which varied depending upon context.

Conclusions

As Hall (2003) has pointed out, over the course of the past two decades the ontological assumptions underpinning comparative research have begun to shift. As a result, many comparativists have moved away from the idea that most social outcomes can be attributed to a few causally significant and universally applied variables and towards the importance of complicated interaction effects between a host of varied causal factors (Hall *op. cit.*: 383, 398). This new focus on more intricate configurations of causality and their study through relatively small numbers of cases has been closely linked to the rise of comparative historical analysis and the growing interest amongst comparativists to ‘historicize the social sciences’ (Collier 1991: 8, 15). As a result, a greater emphasis on the role of long-term trajectories has provided the necessary perspective from which it has been possible to uncover the dynamic conditions invariably responsible for producing large-scale social configurations over time. However, as Pierson (2000: 808; 2004: 5, 6) has explained, whilst historical comparativists often argue that ‘history matters’, this statement is rarely clarified or elaborated upon. According to Skocpol (1984a: 8), the reason why history matters in the study of social phenomena is because it allows scholars to ask ‘bigger questions’ about large-scale social processes, which concurrently leads to the theoretical generalisation as well as the empirical contextualisation of significant social outcomes. The value of historical empiricism therefore lies in its ability to facilitate the pursuit of causally complex macro-social analysis over time and space or in what Charles Tilly (1984) has referred to as ‘big structures, large processes and huge comparisons’. Consequently, comparative historical analysis is particularly concerned with the examination of how long-term institutional and behavioural trajectories can inform the study of large-scale social configurations. Thus, as Skocpol (1984a: 2) has elaborated, historical analysis in the social sciences has been fundamentally interested in how the temporal sequencing of past decisions influences and ultimately shapes the present choices which actors can make.

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