Part I

Introduction

1 Comparative-historical analysis in contemporary political science

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Comparative-historical analysis (CHA) has a long and distinguished pedigree in political science. In a discipline in which a succession of different movements has advocated new approaches promising more powerful theory or new methodologies for more rigorously testing theory, or both, CHA has stood the test of time. It remains the approach of choice for many scholars spanning all generations and continues to set agendas – both theoretical and substantive – for many other scholars who use alternative analytical and methodological tools.

In this introductory chapter, we explore the resilience and continuing influence of CHA in contemporary political science. We attribute the enduring impact of CHA to strengths built into its very defining features: its focus on large-scale and often complex outcomes of enduring importance; its emphasis on empirically grounded, deep case-based research; and its attention to process and the temporal dimensions of politics. These features not only distinguish CHA but also endow the approach with comparative advantages not found in other research.

The methodological churning within political science is not new, and yet it seems to have intensified over the past several years. Beginning in the late 1980s, the field underwent important changes as rational choice theory made its way into the mainstream of the discipline. Scholarship using game theory was greeted with considerable fanfare and controversy, celebrated by some for the theoretical elegance of its models, criticized by others for the limited leverage that these models often seemed to offer in explaining real-world outcomes.[1] Even if this line of work did not have the transformative effects that some predicted, clearly it now occupies an important place in the discipline.

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[1] For a flavor of debates of the day, see Green and Shapiro (1994) and Friedman (1996).

More recently, an empiricist strand of work has emerged with similar energy and force. Billed by its proponents as a "revolution in causal inference," the experimental method has been sweeping through many departments. Today's experimentalists put great emphasis on research design, often recruiting subjects – in the lab, in the field, or online – to participate in experiments that attempt to isolate the effects of variables of concern. This new trend has shifted the terms of debate away from previous disputes about the relative merits of large-*N* and small-*N* research. Instead, both traditional regression analysis and qualitative case-based research are increasingly disparaged by those who see all forms of observational research as fatally hobbled in their ability to nail down causation with any reliability (e.g., Gerber, Green, and Kaplan 2014). Strong proponents of the experimental method solemnly advise graduate students to ignore the revolution in causal inference at their peril.

And, finally, even as we write, "big data" is the new watchword on the political science frontier (e.g., King 2014). Although the term is quite loose, what distinguishes big data from more traditional quantitative research is that it involves huge data sets (often more than a million observations) whose analysis requires specialized computer science techniques (e.g., machine learning). Research agendas organized around big data have been driven in part by technological advances and new social science infrastructures that allow researchers to harvest and manipulate large quantities of information. For scholars who are part of this movement, the issue is what questions these new sources of data and these new techniques might be used to address.

In the midst of this maelstrom, CHA remains a prominent and vibrant research tradition. In fact, in the current context characterized by a feverish concern with data collection and theory testing, CHA stands out by remaining resolutely and unapologetically focused on theory generation and on explaining large and complex outcomes at the macro level that other approaches increasingly shy away from as empirically intractable. Complementing but also competing with these other research approaches, CHA continues to find expression in a steady stream of highly celebrated contemporary works that often set theoretical and substantive agendas that are then taken up by scholars deploying other methods, including proponents of the latest "gold standard."[2]

In what follows, we explore the enduring influence of CHA by highlighting the comparative advantages that stem from its three core defining features.

[2] Many of the major works in CHA are discussed in Mahoney and Rueschemeyer (2003). Appendix A presents a partial list of prominent, recent works in this tradition that we know won important disciplinary awards since 2000 (inevitably, we will have overlooked some, and we apologize for omissions).

First, CHA's *macroconfigurational orientation* links it to the classics in political science and shares with them an abiding concern to explain large-scale political and political-economic outcomes. Second, its focus on problem-driven *case-based research* has been a key source of agenda-setting insights that have enjoyed broad applicability and resonance. Third, CHA's commitment to *temporally oriented analysis* has allowed it to make distinctive contributions to our understanding of process and time in politics. We elaborate the advantages of CHA by drawing out what is gained from each of these three orientations. More important, we consider what is lost in research programs that lack these characteristics. Along the way, we also consider complementarities between CHA and other approaches. We explore how aspects of alternative approaches have been or might be incorporated into CHA. We look at the ways in which CHA might help compensate for weaknesses associated with alternative approaches.

Macroconfigurational research

As a first distinguishing feature, CHA entails *macroconfigurational research*. This feature breaks out into two separate though related components – the "macro" and the "configurational" – and each may be discussed in turn.

A macroscopic orientation

The macro component entails a concern with large-scale outcomes – state building, democratic transitions, societal patterns of inequality, war and peace, to name a few. Researchers often also focus on large-scale causal factors, including both broad political-economic structures (e.g., colonialism) and complex organizational-institutional arrangements (e.g., social policy regimes). The macroscopic orientation of CHA is also signaled by the analysis of aggregate cases: often nation-states but also including political movements, subnational territories, empires, and, in a few cases, even whole civilizations and world systems. Although macrolevel research is associated with CHA scholarship, it is not unique to that tradition. For example, many statistical researchers also seek to explain macro outcomes and focus on broad structural-institutional causes in their work. This shared concern with macroscopic questions has, in fact, allowed for considerable synergies between CHA and quantitative analysis. Such synergies have sustained highly productive research communities in which competition and collaboration among

scholars employing different methods have advanced our understanding of a wide range of outcomes, from revolutions to welfare regimes to democratization (Amenta 2003; Goldstone 2003; Mahoney 2003; Pierson 2000).

In the past, some scholars contrasted CHA's emphasis on macro outcomes and macroscopic causes with alternative approaches committed to "methodological individualism," that is, the idea that political outcomes must be traced back to the actions and motives of individual agents.[3] However, the distinction vanishes in the practice of CHA. In fact, macro theories often direct our attention to which particular microlevel processes or behaviors are likely to be most important and when. For example, Capoccia's analysis of critical junctures turns precisely on identifying moments of structural contingency when actor choice and agency can carry special weight (Capoccia, Chapter 6, this volume). Likewise, macro theories often suggest specific microlevel events and processes that should (or should not) be present within particular cases if the macro theory is correct. As part of testing their theories, CHA scholars who are interested in identifying big patterns over time or across countries often rely on archival and primary sources, zooming in to inspect specific crucial episodes or patterns at closer range, and in some cases delving into the motives and actions of particular historical actors (e.g., Skocpol 1992; Swenson 2002; Ziblatt 2009, forthcoming).

Rather than insist on methodological individualism, CHA takes a position that reflects both pragmatic considerations and a particular ontological commitment. The pragmatic position, well articulated by Daniel Little (2012), is that it is often quite possible to "make careful statements about macro-macro and macro-micro causal relations without proceeding according to the logic of Coleman's boat – up and down the struts" (145).[4] While macrolevel arguments cannot be at odds with micro accounts, their validity does not require that they be broken down into individual-level behaviors; in fact, a requirement to disaggregate all processes into individual-level choices and behaviors would render much macro research infeasible or impossible.

The more foundational point, however, is that where structural features play a key causal role there is nothing to be gained – and much to be

[3] Jon Elster (1982), a leading proponent of methodological individualism, defined the term to mean "the doctrine that all social phenomena (their structure and their change) are in principle explicable only in terms of individuals – their properties, goals, and beliefs" (453). For a thoughtful discussion of the origins of the term and the ambiguities in its usage, see Hodgson (2007).

[4] Little refers to Coleman's (1990) macro-micro-macro model of explanation. The example he gives is Bhopal, where he suggests that it is not necessary "to disaggregate every claim like 'organizational deficiencies at the Bhopal chemical plant caused the devastating chemical spill' onto specific individual-level activities" (Little 2012: 8–9).

lost – by insisting that every outcome be traced back to the actions and strategies of individual agents. To adopt an exclusively micro-oriented approach would mean ignoring important causal processes that can only be understood at higher levels of analysis (Gaventa 1980; Lukes 1968). Many of the most influential works in comparative politics point to systemic characteristics in which structural variables, large-scale processes, or organizational features play a crucial causal role by shaping the interests of individual agents. One cannot understand the interests and actions of key actors without appreciating the macrostructural environment in which they are situated. In this volume, Paul Pierson makes the point with a trenchant critique of how much work in political science fundamentally misses the impact of power by reducing politics to the apparently fluid interactions of individuals.

Causal configurations and context

The configurational component of CHA refers to the way in which researchers consider how multiple factors combine to form coherent larger combinations, complexes, and causal packages. One reason this kind of configurational analysis figures so prominently is because the large-scale outcomes investigated in CHA are themselves often aggregated combinations of multiple events and processes. For example, one cannot study revolutions, democratic transitions, and developmental states without analyzing how various events and underlying processes constitute these phenomena.

However, beyond this, configurational analysis also characterizes a specific mode of *explanation* used in CHA. In this field, one frequently explains macro outcomes by examining how variables work together in combinations or "causal packages" (Ragin 1987). This combinatorial approach to causation assumes complexity in the specific sense that interaction effects – including interactions among more than two variables – are presumed to be common, and thus that individual causal factors normally must be analyzed as parts of larger combinations. Even when CHA scholars are interested in studying the effects of a single factor on an outcome, they consider the ways in which the effects of that variable may vary across different settings. In CHA, specifying the effect of X on Y almost always involves taking into account the "context" in which X operates, which means specifying the other variables that interact with X and that shape the nature of its effect (see, especially, Falleti and Lynch 2009).[5]

[5] On the potentials and challenges of modeling and interpreting interaction effects in quantitative research, see Kam and Franzese (2007).

To invoke a well-known example, consider how O'Donnell (1973) answered the classic question: does economic development cause democracy? His answer was "it depends," and he then set about specifying upon exactly what it depends. In contrast to the conventional wisdom that economic development contributes positively to democracy, O'Donnell found that in South America in the 1960s and 1970s economic development in fact helped to fuel harsh authoritarianism. He argued it did so because economic growth was unfolding in a context marked by mobilized popular sectors and an increasingly prominent role for technocrats within society. Under these specific conditions, economic development was a motor for the creation of repressive military regimes.

CHA researchers adopt a configurational approach to explanation not because they value causal complexity for its own sake or underappreciate parsimony. Instead, for the macro outcomes under study, CHA researchers believe that there is no alternative to analyzing the effects of causes in light of the context in which they occur. Most scholars in this school thus would emphatically agree with Andrew Abbott (1997) when he points out that abstracting a case from its context in the interest of parsimony can lead to deeply misleading results. As he puts it, if such "decontextualization is merely the removal of excess detail, then it's a fine thing, scientifically." But if it eliminates crucial variables and interactions, "it is a scientific disaster" (1171).

Complementarities and trade-offs

Not all approaches are equally well suited to address the macro phenomena at the center of CHA research. Different approaches are designed to address different kinds of questions, and we should be evaluating the costs and benefits of choosing a given approach for the questions we ask and answer. Arguably, one of the main causalities in the "revolution" in causal inference – increasingly acknowledged as well by otherwise sympathetic observers – is a dramatic narrowing of the type of studies that scholars are likely to undertake (Huber 2013). Many of the questions we want to ask about causes and outcomes at the macro level do not lend themselves to an experimental design. What is the relative impact of coercion and co-optation on the durability of authoritarian regimes? What is the role of organized business in American politics? How do multinational corporations affect development? These questions cannot be answered with an experiment for technical, logistical, ethical, or financial reasons.[6]

[6] Lijphart (1971) pointed out long ago that the experimental method "can only rarely be used in political science because of practical and ethical impediments" (684).

The turn to experimental research does not just bias the questions we ask; it often steers the search for answers onto specific paths, toward particular kinds of answers about what factors are seen as causally important.[7] Researchers can almost never manipulate many of the macro factors that we know to be the most important in politics – power, resources, institutions, and ideology – in any meaningful way.[8] Experimental research cannot easily find these factors to be causally consequential, because they simply do not lend themselves to these techniques. By contrast, "information" turns out to be a variable that is especially amenable to treatment, in the lab or in the field.[9] Experiments that vary information (e.g., amount, content, "frame") are relatively easy to design and inexpensive to implement. As a result, a rather large share of experimental work probes the impact of information-based variables, and the findings therefore often report the impact (or not) of treatments that manipulate information in one way or another. Quite apart from the question of whether the resulting experiments are successful on their own terms (for example, avoiding problems of "priming" and other pitfalls), information (or variables that lend themselves to information-based manipulation) may actually be a minor determinant of the outcome of ultimate interest.

From the perspective of the kinds of macrolevel concerns that animate CHA, therefore, one of the more regrettable trends in the discipline is the selection of questions on the basis of methods and data (see also Shapiro 2004, 2014). We all know the story of the drunken man searching for his keys under a lamppost "because this is where the light is best." In the past, this story was invoked as an admonition to pursue the causes of the phenomenon of interest no matter where that search might lead you. Today, however, some scholars suggest that we should seek out questions that lend themselves to "modern" methods and search for answers where the data are most plentiful. They counsel us to leave aside questions – and to bracket possible answers – that, while perhaps important, are empirically intractable. In other words, some scholars are emphatically directing us to look under the lamppost, with the warning that there is no point tapping around in the dark.[10]

[7] For assessments of the strengths and weaknesses of experiments in political science, see Morton and Williams (2010) and Druckman *et al.* (2011).

[8] With an experiment, one can manipulate treatments in ways that attempt to simulate macrostructural factors. For example, one study seeking to determine whether a leader's status affects his/her ability to elicit cooperation established participants' "status" through their performance in trivia games (Eckel, Fatas, and Wilson 2010). However, one usually cannot actually manipulate macrostructural factors themselves. For a rare exception, see Beath, Christia, and Enikolopov (2013).

[9] We are indebted to Ben Schneider for this point.

[10] We thank Paul Pierson for this point, based on remarks made by a prominent scholar of American politics who cited the lamppost example in just this way.

However, this intense narrowing of questions comes at a huge cost. We have already seen how the study of economic development in some quarters has been reduced to serial exercises in program evaluation (Deaton 2014) and how the study of American politics has become ever more focused on public opinion and electoral behavior (Pierson 2007). These developments have gone hand in hand with a skepticism toward observational research that has caused some scholars to swear off macrolevel outcomes and complex institutional configurations as hopelessly confounded and instead to zero in on narrower questions for which an experiment can be devised or a large-*N* data set can be assembled. Yet one cannot help but wonder whether searching for answers where the light is brightest in fact captures the most important explanations. For example, the ready availability of public opinion data (combined increasingly with survey experiments) has driven a significant renaissance in behavioral research centering on what individual citizens say they want. And while we learn a great deal as a result about what people are thinking, citizen preferences are not necessarily the main driver of many of the outcomes we wish to explain. Just as the massive growth of high-end inequality in the United States seems hard to trace back to the preferences of voters, so, too, are outcomes such as the dramatic transformation of the Chinese political economy or the dreary durability of authoritarian regimes throughout much of the world hard to link to the micro attitudes and preferences of ordinary citizens.

Turning now to the configurational aspect of CHA, we noted earlier that CHA research assesses theories that assume complex causal interactions and indeed often puts such configurations at the very heart of the analysis. On the one hand, a concern with configurations rooted in specific cases at least partially differentiates CHA from statistical research, which is often more concerned with estimating the average effects of particular variables or perhaps simple interactions across large populations of cases. On the other hand, however, CHA can and does powerfully team up with statistical analyses that are similarly focused on macrolevel outcomes and variables. As Lieberman points out in this volume, much can be gained by combining traditional regression analysis with a close analysis of systematically selected cases. Statistical studies are often helpful in identifying broad patterns about individual variables, while CHA identifies how these variables work together in configurations to generate outcomes in specific cases. Conversely, CHA findings about causal configurations for particular sets of cases can stimulate statistical hypothesis testing aimed at identifying the more general effects of the variables in these configurations.