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Author

Brubaker, Rogers

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Beyond Comparativism?

Rogers Brubaker

Last year, I was asked to participate in a panel addressing "the role of comparativism" as part of a conference on "Race/ethnicity, self/culture, and inequality." Noting that I had written on moving "beyond identity" and "beyond groupism," Michèle Lamont introduced me by jokingly suggesting that I would speak on going "beyond comparativism." Since my own research trajectory had indeed taken me "beyond" cross-national comparative work, I took up this gambit and tried to think about what "comparativism" is and what -- if anything -- it might mean to move "beyond comparativism." The following rough notes are no more than a starting point for discussion.

I

Between 1995 and 2001, I spent a good part of my summers in the ethnically mixed Transylvanian Romanian town of Cluj, and I have been working since then on a book based on that research (Brubaker et al 2003). The book seeks to heed Eric Hobsbawm's dictum that nationhood and nationalism, while constructed from above, "cannot be understood unless also analyzed from below, that is, in terms of the assumptions, hopes, needs, longings and interests of ordinary people, which are not necessarily national and still less nationalist" (1990: 10). The book analyzes how ethnicity (or "nationality," as it is called in the region) works in everyday life in a local setting marked by flamboyantly nationalist politics, pitting a radically anti-Hungarian Romanian nationalist mayor, with a flair for provocative symbolic gestures, against a well-organized and strongly nationalist Hungarian party that seeks cultural and territorial autonomy for Hungarians within the Romanian state. This pervasively nationalist local political setting is, in turn, embedded in a series of wider regional and historical contexts, many of which provide support for local nationalism. Yet while ethnicity does figure in ways large and small in everyday life, the ordinary citizens of Cluj -- Hungarian and Romanian -- are largely indifferent to the nationalist political claims and counterclaims advanced in their names.

Does this shift away from the "big structures, large processes, huge comparisons" (Tilly 1984) I pursued in earlier work on immigration, citizenship, and the nation state in France and Germany and on nationalism in interwar and post-Cold War Eastern Europe mean a retreat from comparative analysis?

I want to argue here that it does not. This project does not represent a move from $N=2$ (or more) to $N = 1$. The Cluj project is not a *case study*, but a *place study*. Cluj is not a *unit of analysis* studied in isolation from (or, except tangentially, even in comparison to) other coordinate units. Cluj is rather a *strategic research site* for studying processes that are of more general theoretical interest.

A number of comparative perspectives, of varying scale and scope, are implicated in this project. Some examples:

- A comparison of the way ethnicity is constituted, organized and expressed in Eastern Europe on the one hand and northwestern Europe and the U.S. on the other: broadly speaking, this is a contrast between ethnoterritorial nationality (generated by borders moving over people) and immigrant ethnicity (generated by people moving over borders).
- A comparison of Yugoslavia and Romania in terms of their very different trajectories of politicized ethnicity after the fall of communism, leading to the violent disintegration of the state in the one case, and to almost no ethnonational violence (and little fear of violence) in the other.
- A comparison of the *actual* course of events in Cluj -- and in particular the low degree of ethnic mobilization and absence of ethnic violence and fear of violence -- with what one might have *expected*, given the hyper-nationalist local and statewide political scene, and other contextual factors that might have led one, circa 1990, to see violence as possible, if not probable, in Cluj.
- A comparison of the post-communist trajectory of politicized ethnicity in Cluj and in a neighboring Transylvanian town, Tîrgu Mureş, where ethnic violence, albeit limited and contained, did occur in March 1990.
- A comparison over time of the nationalizing policies and projects that followed successive changes in sovereignty as Cluj (and with it all or part of Transylvania) became Hungarian in 1867, Romanian at the end of 1918, Hungarian again in 1940, and Romanian once more in 1944.
- A comparison of the symbolic politics focused on, and the everyday uses of, the town's two main squares, one symbolically "Hungarian," the other "Romanian."
- A comparison between the way minority Hungarians and majority Romanians experience ethnicity in Cluj.
- A comparison across generations of Hungarian Clujeni in their experience of and stance toward ethnicity and nationalism. The key comparison here is between (1) Hungarians old enough to have experienced the brief period of Hungarian rule during the Second World War; (2) middle-aged Hungarians who experienced the rapid demographic, cultural, and economic Romanianization of the town in the 1960s and 1970s; and (3) Hungarians under 25 or so, who have grown up or at least entered adolescence after the fall of Ceauşescu, and who are more preoccupied with getting ahead, more exposed to international influences, and less interested in nationalist quarrels than their elders.
- A comparison of the way Transylvanian Hungarians and Hungarians in Hungary experience and articulate their Hungarianness.

- A comparison of the self-understandings of long-settled Transylvanian Romanians and those of Romanians from "the South," which most Transylvanians (Hungarian and Romanian) see in Huntingtonian terms as separated from Transylvania by a civilizational fault line.
- A comparison of the experience of Transylvanian Hungarians living as a compact majority in Szekler region of Transylvania and that of Transylvanian Hungarians living as a minority in Cluj.
- A comparison of the way the major Romanian and Hungarian national holidays are officially celebrated and unofficially experienced in Cluj.

What follows from this enumeration? That this work is comparativist after all? This would be one way of putting it, but perhaps not the most helpful way. For if this work is comparativist, then we are all comparativists. The sorts of comparisons made in this work are made in all kinds of sociological work, most of which would not ordinarily be placed under the "comparative" rubric.

Comparison, I suggest, is intrinsic to social research and sociological analysis, in all phases and at all levels. But if comparison is everywhere, it is nowhere in particular. So I return to the "beyond comparativism" trope: perhaps we might indeed think of moving beyond comparativism *as a distinctive genre of research with its own method*.

One might argue -- to be a little more specific -- that there is no distinct enterprise of comparative historical sociology. Historical work, it might be argued in support of this position, is no more comparative than any other work. And macroanalytic work is no more comparative than micro-level work. The association of "comparison" with historical and macroanalytic work -- and particularly with work that takes nation-states as its units of analysis -- has no intellectual warrant; it is a matter of convention, not of the logic of inquiry.

Conversely, comparative work is no more historical than other work. Historicity is an ontological feature of human social life. It is central -- or it should be central -- to all or at least most forms of sociological analysis, far beyond what we conventionally think of as historical sociology. Similarly, comparison is or ought to be an intrinsic feature of all sociological analysis (as it is of social life itself -- a point to which I return below).

At a particular moment -- what one might call the Skocpolian moment -- it was useful to represent comparative historical sociology as a distinctive enterprise, founded on a distinctive method. In retrospect, this can be seen as a strategy of academic legitimation and institution-building -- a remarkably successful one, thanks to the energy and initiative of Theda Skocpol and others. This created an institutional niche -- a recognized subfield, a section of the ASA, book series, journals, prizes, job descriptions, and so on -- that those who came later, myself included, could inhabit without having to argue that what they were doing was a legitimate way of doing sociology.

Having benefited from the existence of this institutional niche, I am certainly grateful for this work of institution-building and legitimation done by Skocpol and others. One token of its success, however -- about which one can be ambivalent -- is that today we see a routinization of comparative work, sometimes involving a rather mechanical and intellectually dubious application of a Millian "method of difference," or some other method.

Stepping back from institutional struggles and strategies, one might argue that there is no distinctive "comparative method." Mill's method of difference -- like other comparative strategies -- is indeed heuristically useful. As a scientific "method," however, designed to validate knowledge produced in accordance with its precepts, it is intellectually vulnerable, as Lieberson (1991) and others have pointed out.¹ One might well embrace a wide range of *strategies* of comparative analysis as heuristically useful without asserting -- and, happily, without needing to assert -- that any of them provides an ironclad *method* for producing valid scientific results.

II

My argument here is not only that comparative work may not be best thought of as a distinctive enterprise with a distinctive method. It is also that certain conventional ways of posing comparative questions are potentially problematic.

Here I come back to the question of cross-national (or, in keeping with the focus of this conference, cross-ethnic, cross-racial, or otherwise cross-cultural) comparisons. There is a certainly a role for comparative work framed in this way, and I've undertaken such work myself.

But there are problems. When the nation-state is taken in quasi-automatic fashion as the unit of analysis, this may raise problems of what has been called "methodological nationalism" (Wimmer 200x; Beck 200x) -- i.e. problems of taking the nation-state for granted as a "natural" unit of analysis, a practice that may become increasingly difficult to justify insofar as the state loses its power to contain and "cage" (Mann 1993: 61)² social life.³

Somewhat similar problems arise when one takes putatively bounded ethnic groups as units of analysis. One might construe the resulting problems of methodological "ethnicism" (King 2001) or methodological "racialism" (cf. Loveman 1999) as parallel to those of methodological nationalism.

¹ Not all comparative methods are Millian, to be sure. I won't consider here other methods such as the Boolean strategies proposed by Ragin (1989) or the "configurational" comparisons discussed by Tilly (1984).

² As Mann has noted elsewhere in criticizing accounts of globalization, the state has *not* uniformly lost its power to contain and frame social life. In some domains, he notes -- such as the regulation of what had previously been considered private behavior -- the regulatory grip of the state has become tighter rather than looser (Mann 1997: 491-2).

³ Although he does not use the expression "methodological nationalism," Favell's nuanced criticism of my own work on France and Germany makes a similar point (1998:228).

The difficulty in each case involves unreflectively taking a putatively bounded entity as one's unit of analysis, without attending to the ways in which the "entity" in question is only imperfectly, and perhaps decreasingly, bounded. It involves reifying category boundaries, perhaps at the very moment that such categories are blurring.

If we are interested in studying how ethnicity (or race or nationality) "works"; or how culture works (Swidler 1986); or how inequality (and equality) are constituted in everyday life; then we need to be cautious about organizing comparative work around nation-states, ethnic groups, races, or cultures of any kind as taken-for-granted units of analysis. For it is precisely the "unitness," "entitativity," or "groupness" of such units of analysis that is at issue. We don't want to *presuppose* that entitativity or groupness by inscribing it into the very terms in which we pose our research questions.⁴

III

Comparison is not only an academic procedure; it is a vernacular social practice. It is an important part of what some anthropologists (e.g. Hirschfeld 1996) have called "folk sociology." Indeed, this vernacular practice knits together the themes of ethnicity and race, self and culture, and inequality around which this conference was organized.

Race, ethnicity, and nationality are *intrinsically* comparative. They presuppose a comparative orientation to other coordinate units -- to other races, other ethnicities, other nationalities, understood as instances of the same kind of thing. (In this respect, race, ethnicity, and nationality are unlike civilizations or empires, which do not presuppose, though they are of course compatible with, reference to other coordinate units.)

The self, too, is an intrinsically comparative and relational construction. It is a commonplace in sociology, anthropology, and psychology that self and identity are constructed in relation to some other. The same holds for culture -- at least for "cultures" in the prevailing plural sense. Classic anthropological conception of culture, deriving from Herder, presuppose a pluralistic world of coordinate "cultures."⁵

A similar point can be made, finally, about inequality. Inequality is intrinsically comparative. Here I want to emphasize not the role of comparison in *studying* inequality, but the role of (vernacular) comparison in *constituting* it. To be sure, inequality *as a social scientific fact* is constituted by comparisons of external observers. But inequality *as a lived experience* depends on vernacular comparison. It depends on my saying: you have more than I, they have more than we. But who are you? Who am I? Who are they? Who are we? How are the parties to the comparison *formulated*? What are the categories, the units in terms of which the lived experience of inequality is formulated?

⁴ One can make a parallel argument about taking "groups" of any kind as units of analysis. This is a familiar critical point in anthropology, and increasingly in sociology as well (Brubaker 2002). There is increasing recognition of problems involved in taking putatively bounded, homogeneous "cultures" as units of analysis. As cognitively informed research suggests (DiMaggio 1997), this is not the way culture works.

⁵ On "pluralism" as a key idea in Herder, see Berlin 19xx.

What schemas inform the perception and experience of inequality?⁶ What categories are central to the vernacular comparative folk sociology of inequality?

For students of ethnicity, the question concerns the circumstances in which everyday perceptions and experiences of inequality will be formulated in ethnic or racial rather than other terms. The fact that we, as analysts, may be disposed to formulate comparisons in this way, or that ethnic entrepreneurs formulate them in this way, does not mean that everyday comparisons will be formulated in this way by ordinary people.⁷

How then can we devise a strategy for the study of vernacular comparisons that will enable us to see which *vernacular explanatory schemas* will be drawn on in what circumstances, without imposing our own *analytical explanatory schemas* on those whom we are studying? There is a big difference between *imposing* categories of comparison -- because we, as researchers, think we know what comparisons, formulated in terms of what categories, are relevant -- and seeking to *discover* the relevant vernacular categories of comparison in different contexts.

This latter strategy can be said to involve a comparative study of comparison: a comparative analytical sociology of the vernacular comparisons embodied and expressed in folk sociology. Such a comparative study of comparisons would address the following sorts of questions: In what settings are vernacular comparisons articulated in class terms? In individualistic terms? In ethnic or racial or national terms? In occupational terms? In status group terms?⁸ Of course we should not expect vernacular comparisons in any given setting to draw only on a single set of categories. People can and regularly do deploy multiple frames of comparative reference.

Conclusion

Beyond comparison? Certainly not! Beyond comparativism, as an "ism"? Well, why not?

⁶ This will not be a question of a single schema, but is likely to involve dual or multiple schemas. As DiMaggio (1997) emphasizes, people have a variety of loosely integrated and often contradictory schemas to draw on. This finding from cognitive work resonates with Swidler's (1986) notion of culture as a loosely integrated tool-kit.

⁷ In our research in Cluj, for example, we discovered that judgments of inequality are rarely formulated in ethnic terms. The "they" who have more than "we" are ordinarily conceived in moral or stratificational terms.

⁸ Weber offered hints about this in his classic text on class, status, and party. In situation of drastic economic restructuring, "class situation" -- in Weberian sense of market-determined life chances -- becomes more important than "status," including ethnicity: "As to the general economic conditions making for the predominance of stratification by status, only the following can be said. When the bases of the acquisition and distribution of goods are relatively stable, stratification by status is favored. Every technological repercussion and economic transformation threatens stratification by status and pushes the class situation into the foreground. Epochs and countries in which the naked class situation is of predominant significance are regularly the periods of technical and economic transformation. And every slowing down of the change in economic stratification leads, in due course, to the growth of status structures and makes for a resuscitation of the important role of social honor" (ES 938)

Sociologists will certainly go on thinking comparatively, in myriad forms, and at all levels. This will include thinking comparatively about the comparisons that are built into social life itself. These include the *institutionalized* frameworks and infrastructures of comparison that help frame public discourse and organize public perceptions (such as censuses, preferential treatment regimes, and other legal and administrative classificatory schemes); they also include the *vernacular* comparisons that produce and reproduce race, ethnicity, culture, self-understandings, and the experience of inequality in the moment-to-moment give and take of interaction.

Yet while we will continue to think comparatively, we need not do so -- and I do not see any particular profit in doing so -- as a distinctive subcategory of sociologists, that is, as comparativists.

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