

A 'slow' manifesto for comparative research on work and employment

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Paper prepared for the International Labour Process Conference, University of Sheffield,
4th-6th April, 2017

Abstract:

This paper addresses cross-national comparative research in employment relations and related fields. Its purpose is to argue the case for research which makes a long-term, in-depth engagement with the local and national social contexts under study, in order to gain deeper and more reliable insights into the nature of, and reasons for, cross-national similarities and differences. We call this form of engagement "slow comparativism".

We aim to establish a number of basic precepts of 'slow comparativism' as a practical methodological approach. In presenting these, we will raise a number of questions which we think are important to all attempts at in-depth comparison, and which, we argue, need to be considered at all stages of the research process (research design, execution, and the presentation of findings). These questions include:

(i) challenges in accessing the local 'common sense' of actors, through research processes which should be seen as much more encompassing than what happens in formal research processes such as interviews;

(ii) challenges, both literal and figurative, of acquiring local 'languages';

(iii) challenges of avoiding ethnocentrism through creating and maintaining a critical distance from the assumptions of research subjects through part-alienation and ensuring reflexivity;

(iv) challenges of comparability between fieldwork conducted in different countries, and the need to think of comparative research as constituting 'federal' projects, thinking of fieldwork in different countries as constituting linked, but to some extent separate projects.

Our analysis is developed through an examination of comparative literature in industrial relations, as well as through reflection on the challenges the two authors have faced in executing in-depth comparative research on labour management, industrial relations, and trade union organisation.

Our presentation of these challenges, and the difficulties that comparative scholars of work and employment face in resolving them, can, we hope, be used to provoke a discussion among those conducting comparative research on work and employment about how truth claims are generated in general. We also seek to provide a basis by which those conducting slower forms of comparativism, through what we term 'implicit ethnographies', can find better ways of developing and defending their modes of research within a broader academic political economy which is not always favourable to such approaches.

Introduction

This paper addresses cross-national comparative research in employment relations and related fields. Its purpose is to articulate a case for research which makes a long-term, in-depth engagement with the social contexts under study, in order to gain deeper and more reliable insights into the nature of, and reasons for, cross-national differences and similarities. We call this form of research engagement 'slow comparativism'.

Our argument stems from a concern that the ecology of cross-national comparative research has, in recent years, altered in ways which are not favourable to in-depth comparisons. While there has, overall, been an increase in the volume of research which covers different national contexts, much of this research is based on rather 'fast', or 'thin' forms of comparison: in other words, it is characterised by limited sociological engagement with the dynamics of the societies under study. This has resulted in, at best, a limited ability to identify causal factors which are outside the scope of research frameworks determined *ex ante*, and at worst, flat-out misunderstandings of the local and national dynamics of social action arising from a lack of comprehension of the choices available to actors in particular social settings.

We do not intend to argue that forms of comparative research that we would characterise as 'fast' lack value in our attempts to understand the global and local dynamics of employment relations. However, we do think that comparative research needs a better balance between faster and slower technologies of investigation. We attempt to contribute towards this rebalancing by establishing a number of basic precepts of 'slow comparativism' as a practical methodological approach. We will do this by raising a number of questions, or challenges, which we think are important to all attempts at in-depth comparison, and which, we argue, need to be considered at all stages of the research process. These questions include: challenges in accessing the local 'common sense' or interpretive frameworks of actors, and the challenges, both literal and figurative, of acquiring local languages; challenges of avoiding ethnocentrism through maintaining a critical distance from the assumptions of research subjects (or of particular national systems) through the researcher achieving part-alienation and sustaining reflexivity; and challenges of comparability between fieldwork conducted in different national settings.

Between them, as we will explain, these challenges mean that research processes need to be seen as more encompassing than what happens in formal research processes such as interviews, and more iterative than standard expositions of methodology normally allow. We will also argue that slow comparative research needs to be conceived as constituting somewhat 'federal' projects, where fieldwork in different countries is seen as constituting linked, but to some extent separable, national projects.

Resolving these questions involves an approach to the exercise of comparative research that is somewhat ethnographic and reflexive. However, it does not necessarily need to use ethnographic approaches in the formal sense. While generally primarily qualitative in nature, we believe that slow comparativism is compatible with a range of approaches to data-gathering. We will argue, for example, that there is no reason that those whose formal methodological approach is the standard semi-structured interview cannot engage with slow comparativism, and our presentation of precepts is intended to aid in this. Broadly speaking, our argument is for something of a convergence between relatively orthodox qualitatively-oriented case-study research, and formally ethnographic research, in which non-ethnographers engage more deeply with local contexts when undertaking comparative research, and ethnographic researchers think more comparatively.

Our analysis is developed through an examination of comparative literature on industrial relations, and is also informed by reflection on the challenges the two authors have faced in executing in-depth comparative research on labour management, industrial relations, and trade union organisation. The first half of the paper attempts to locate slow comparativism within the ecology of comparative employment relations research, while the second part establishes a number of basic precepts which we see as necessary to the practice of slow comparativism. Finally, our concluding discussion considers how a slow comparative agenda might be taken forward.

Comparative research approaches

One of the minor results of the globalisation both of the general social world and of the Academy has been a marked increase in the volume of research which makes claims to contributing to knowledge through cross-national comparison. For example, Almond and Gonzalez (2013), focussing on labour management and using a fairly selective list of journals, found 179 papers published between 2001 and 2010 that had some claim to be making explicit cross-national comparisons. To these, one might add a large number of single-country studies which could be described as 'implicit comparisons' in that they draw extensively upon comparative frameworks in making truth claims (e.g. Dalton and Bingham, 2016; Connolly, 2010). Finally, we frequently see claims in non-comparative work that industrial and employment relations operate in a certain way in a particular country because of its status within a comparative typology – probably the most common being the argument that the world of work and employment is structured in a particular way in a given country because of its status as a 'liberal' or 'coordinated' market economy.

For the current purposes, however, it is worthwhile to have a slightly narrower definition of what comparative research is (and isn't). We start with the working definition of Hantrais and Mangen (1996:1), who state that comparative research

"attempt(s) to study particular issues or phenomena in two or more countries with the express intention of comparing their manifestation in different socio-cultural settings, using the same research instruments".

A number of qualifiers could be made to this definition, of which two are worth mentioning here. First, as has been widely noted elsewhere, 'countries', in the traditional comparativist's sense of internationally recognised sovereign states, increasingly lack closure as containers of 'socio-cultural settings' or as the locus of regulation (Jessop, 2013). We reject fashionable arguments that comparativism in an era of transnational influences is inherently 'methodologically nationalist' (Beck, 2007; Erne, 2013), as we would argue that a full understanding of transnational processes and influences requires an in-depth analysis and comparison of their realisation and interpretation in specific geographies. However it is probably necessary to relax the assumption that these geographies are always national-sovereign: if comparing the nature of workplace governance, there are marked intra-national differences in some cases (Bélanger and Trudeau, 2007; Rutherford and Holmes, 2013). We would therefore argue that comparative methodologies could be usefully deployed within as well as between sovereign states, where there is sufficient reason to expect differences in the 'socio-cultural settings' pertinent to the issues being researched.

Second, and more fundamentally, while commonality of research instruments is, on the face of it, desirable, we will argue below that, for slow comparison, there are cases where this is not possible or optimal due to differences in the nature of socio-cultural settings as it affects the particular issue at hand. The well-established problem of ensuring genuine comparability (Locke and Thelen, 1995) sometimes requires that our approach to the act of comparison is rather more indirect. This is a significant problem for in-depth comparative social research, and the second part of this paper includes reflection on how slow comparison can achieve this.

Comparative approaches and their operationalisation: fast and thin vs deep comparisons

Within comparative research, there is a basic underlying tension between two types of approach, which we characterise as 'thin' and 'deep' approaches.

'Thin' approaches try to compare cross-sectionally on the basis of standardised variables; national social and cultural specificities are often here seen as undesirable empirical 'noise', which somewhat gets in the way of the main objective of establishing relationships between independent and dependent variables in as standardised a way as possible. Such approaches are often based, implicitly or explicitly, on forms of contingency theory, and try to draw relations between variables in all national environments, "posing the existence of a rationality above and beyond national specifics and cultural particularities" (Maurice, 1979: 43).

Maurice was criticising research using contingencies drawn from organisational theory, such as markets, technology and firm size. However, it is also the case that a fairly large volume of cross-sectional international research, often based on statistical comparisons of a large number of countries, uses indicators of more macro-level economic, social and political characteristics (Kjetil van der Wal and Halvorsen, 2015). Where it is recognised that countries have rather different national cultures or institutional settings, a 'thin' comparativist will relatively happily ascribe countries to typologies, whether based on geographical groupings at the level of (sub) continents, perceived cultural similarities, or to established theoretical frameworks. This process risks being merely taxonomic, as the aim, or in some cases the methodological precept, "of assigning national cases to categoric boxes overwhelms any attempt at analysis and explanation" (Hyman 2001: 203).

'Thin' comparativism allows what we would characterise as rather 'fast' approaches to the practice of comparative methodology. A 'fast' approach is characterised by the use of standardised questions, with limited attempts to ensure the comparability of those questions. Where language is an issue, either in surveys or in interviewing processes, these can be resolved through (linguistic) translators and interpreters – the 'back translator' for the international survey, the interpreter in the qualitative interview. Attempts are made to maximise the comparability of respondents, but in a rather superficial way; while it may be appreciated that a trade union representative takes a somewhat different form in the UK to France, that a German works council is not the same thing as a Spanish one, or that part-time employment means different things in different places, methodologically the problem must be ironed out in order to replicate a study internationally. In short, thin comparisons allow for fast approaches to comparison, which can, on its own terms, be relatively successful in establishing the relations between variables without going very far in problematizing the question of comparability, or acquiring particularly in-depth knowledge of national social contexts. A fast comparativist will be confident of being able to conduct research interviews in a country with which s/he has relatively little familiarity, relying on his/her knowledge of the substantive research area.

Thin approaches to comparison, and in particular fast methods of operationalisation, are favoured by the political economy of research. In particular they can respond, on their own terms successfully, to the frequent need for research to cover large numbers of countries due to institutional funder requirements, and to the incentives to make positivistic claims about the relations between standardised variables across as large an n as possible.

The problems of such 'fast'/'thin' comparisons have been extensively elucidated elsewhere (e.g. Maurice et al, 1982; Marsden, 1999). Briefly, in divorcing variables from the socio-cultural-political contexts in which their concrete meaning is interpreted and realised by actors, cross-sectional research often fails to understand

how phenomena or issues are socially constructed. This point is raised by Richard Hyman "union density is under 10% in France but over 80% in Sweden. Can we assume that trade unionism *means* the same thing in the two countries...?" (2004: 271). This argument is further developed by Jill Rubery;

"Apparently similar forms of economic or social organisation may in fact serve very different functions within different societies. To take part-time employment as an example, before it can be determined what role part-time work plays in absorbing surplus labour in recessions..., it is necessary to undertake a detailed analysis of, amongst other factors, the share of the informal economy, the overall participation rates, the measured level of unemployment, the family division of labour and hours of work for full-timers, and the role of part-time work in the productive system. In short the relative importance of the role of part-time work in disguising unemployment cannot be simply read off from a comparison of the shares of part-time work between societies" (Rubery, 1992).

We quote the above passage at length because it is representative in showing that the problems of fast approaches cannot fully be rectified by becoming more sophisticated in dealing with the meanings of national statistics (see Marsden, 1999). However the family division of labour, and how this translates into the norms of the employment relationship, through the welfare state, labour law and the choices of industrial relations actors, and the responses taken by individuals in response to this, remains difficult to analyse in any standardised way, even if such sensitivity is displayed.

Because of this, 'thin', cross-sectional, broadly positivist approaches using 'fast' technologies of research, are sometimes contrasted with 'deep' approaches more interested in the discontinuities between societies. In the field of international management, Jackson and Deeg, arguing for a deeper institutionalism, argue for an "emphasis...on *how* and *why* institutions differ across countries, often starting from a 'thick' description of institutions...and holistic analysis of institutions within a specific national 'case'" (Jackson and Deeg, 2008: 541). Likewise, deeper forms of comparativism in the field of employment relations often have some debt to 'societal' or 'societal institutionalist' research (Maurice et al, 1982; Djelic and Quack, 2003). While it is certainly not necessary to be a follower of a societal institutionalist framework in order to practice 'deep' comparativism, it is important to recognise the interlocking nature of different 'spheres' of society/political economy (see Almond and Gonzalez, 2013). This means going beyond the addition of independent or control variables from outside the direct sphere of work and employment (which in principle can be done within contingency-type approaches, see e.g. Pudelko, 2006, in the field of human resource management), and instead focusing on the interactions and interrelations both within and between different potentially relevant 'spheres' (e.g. industrial relations, finance, education, and welfare systems) of

national political economies, and how these shape the choices made by workers, managers, firms and the state. Deep comparativism also often pays considerable attention to the historical construction of national systems, in trying to understand the choices of contemporary actors (e.g. Jacoby, 2006).

The distinction between 'thin' and 'deep' approaches was once fairly clear (compare Hickson et al, 1979 and Maurice, 1979). In some ways, though, and particularly in industrial relations, the success of societal institutionalist approaches has muddied the waters somewhat. In particular, as approaches based on the comparison of interlocking spheres of societal action have solidified from the positing of 'discontinuities' between national societies and capitalisms posited by the LEST school to the more codified, and typology-friendly, varieties of capitalism approach, there has been something of a convergence between the two types of approach. In other words, societal institutionalism has become more accessible to 'fast' techniques of comparison as its focus has sharpened and the variables to be analysed have become somewhat standardised. This has meant that it is possible to draw upon the Varieties of Capitalism approach, for example, without much enquiry into why particular institutions operate as they do: varieties of capitalism has become something of a script, rather than a technology of comparison. Warnings made by earlier comparativists (e.g. Marsden, 1986) about the dangers of point-for-point comparisons have too often been forgotten, or their implications ignored. In other words, when initially 'deep' approaches become internationally standardised, to permit use by 'fast' comparativists, they risk becoming somewhat 'thin'.

The problem, or challenge, is that 'deep' comparativism can only achieve its objectives to the extent that the researcher is confident of having understood the relevant interdependencies and interconnections within and between all the different spheres of social space which shape his/her particular area of interest. This is, in reality, much more complicated than simply reading off the apparent interconnections between spheres as posited by societal institutionalists. It is also worth noting that some of the comparative institutionalist frameworks often used in industrial relations (e.g. Whitley, 1999; Hall and Soskice, 2001) were created to explain the comparative nature of how firms coordinate to create and exploit value, and that the process of spotting potentially relevant interconnections other than posed by such frameworks is likely to be more complicated the further one's object of research departs from this. Therefore, while comparative frameworks which set out relevant 'spheres' may be helpful as a guide, in many cases the relevant interlockages can only really be discovered at least partly inductively, and may emerge to the researcher in a relatively *ad-hoc* way (we return to this point in the precepts section below).

The question that arises from this is how the researcher manages to access societal logics, and to understand the (multiple and conflicting) processes of thoughts that

have currency in guiding action in specific societies. Our core argument is that this means acquiring a deep understanding of societal dynamics, and that this is not at all easy to achieve. Furthermore, in our experience this mostly occurs outside the formal research processes found within defences of methodology, and hence is quite difficult to evaluate, as it is difficult to reconcile with norms of positive science around reliability and replicability (Burawoy, 1998; Katz, 2015). Above all, it is a very iterative process which tends to take a long time (hence 'slow' comparativism).

Basic characteristics of the "thin" and "deep" approaches, and the "fast" and "slow" approaches, are presented in Table 1. We acknowledge that the two dimensions of difference here are not entirely binary, rather there is a continuum between thin and deep, and one between fast and slow. Equally, as indicated above, while slow comparativism aims at achieving depth, not all deep comparativists employ slow comparative strategies.

Table 1: Comparative approaches and strategies

Thin approach

Variable/contingency-driven approach

More interest in transversal knowledge of subject area than of deep understanding of national societies.

Deep approach

Problematizes "thin" ideas of comparability of standardised variables

Argues for need to understand 'interlockages' between complexes of variables across national societies

More interest in contextual understanding of national society/history/culture

Fast strategy

Standardised questions (both in quantitative and qualitative research), relatively little deviation from methodological approaches used in non-comparative research.

High tolerance of typologies

Maximise 'superficial' comparability of respondents

Perceives little need to acquire in-depth, on the ground understanding of national social dynamics. Low "societal reflexivity"

High degree of closure of projects

Slow strategy

Much more iterative process, tolerant of variation in methodology in different societal contexts.

Suspicious of typologies, seeks to access and evaluate counter-narratives.

Much less concerned with formal comparability of respondents; opportunist approach to data

Sees geographical context as very important, seeks to develop (implicit) ethnography of societies. High "societal reflexivity"

Low degree of closure of projects

Precepts of 'slow' comparativism as a practical methodological approach

The processes involved in slow comparison are difficult to codify, but given that we think that understanding context as fully as possible is important to the advancement of comparative research, we present here some basic precepts for practically executing slow comparativism. We hope these will be of service both as a starting point for a fuller discussion on the methods used by slow comparativists, and as a defence for such research in a somewhat 'fast' climate driven by the short-term execution of projects, rapid publication, and other related pressures.

a) speaking the 'language'

This fairly obvious precept applies both literally and metaphorically. First, it is difficult to achieve a deep understanding of societies without a good understanding of the relevant language(s). Even if research subjects are able and willing to communicate in a *lingua franca*, the societal context does not follow suit. For the great comparativist Benedict Anderson, "When you start to live in a country whose language you understand barely or not at all, you are obviously not in a good position to think comparatively, because you have little access to the local culture...You cannot avoid making comparisons, but these are likely to be superficial and naïve" (Anderson, 2016: 15). There are also likely to be class response biases if research in non-Anglophone countries is conducted in English.

From within the comparative IR literature, Meardi argues that linguistic issues affect the quality of data achievable in methodologies that rely on interviews or conversations. "Interviewees facing a foreigner have a knowledge advantage: they can assume that the interviewer has little familiarity with the field, and that consequently almost everything can be told...knowledge of the local language allows the heavy interference of an interpreter to be avoided. If they show some familiarity and...links with the country, the risk of being treated as a kind of naïve tourist are reduced (Meardi, 2000: 90). Speaking the language also allows for 'slower' methods that can lead to access to a wider range of social settings within the context of the research. In a piece of research led by one of the authors (Connolly, 2010; Connolly and Darlington, 2012), speaking French led to both participant and non-participant observation and greater flexibility in choice of methods. In contrast in another piece of research (Connolly et al, 2014), not speaking the Dutch language limited access opportunities and relied on interpreters.

Second, it should go without saying, but unfortunately often does not in the English-dominated international Academy, that it is, to say the least, polite to read the relevant research of academics in the societies that one plans to investigate. As well as supplying important secondary information in relatively standard ways, this also

permits the development of an understanding of national differences in the framing of social questions (Almond, 2004; Frege, 2005).

These two issues are both more obviously present where the countries under comparison use different languages. However we would argue that they are not absent even if this complication is absent. Assuming comparability of meaning of terminology is a mistake to be avoided even in the same language, and this particularly applies if research subjects are likely to depart substantially from standard formal language.

b) immersion and methodological implications

This refers to the 'slow' process of accessing the 'common sense' of relevant actors. A slow research strategy places value on time spent in the societies under study to acquire local meanings, and requires fieldwork to be seen as a much more encompassing process than just what happens in formal research settings such as interviews. Leads are often indirect, and valuable evidence can be acquired by informal conversations with relevant (or semi-relevant) people, and simply by developing, on an informal basis, a somewhat ethnographic approach to one's interactions with the wider society.

Meardi's (2013) review of Gumbrell-McCormick and Hyman's (2013) impressive comparative work on trade unions across Western Europe argues that while the authors have collected interviews and crossed 'linguistic and cultural barriers with an unbelievable ease' (p. 468), the voices are mainly from people responsible for trade unions. This limitation is largely compensated in the book by the strong familiarity with multilingual literature and by the coverage of different sources, but Meardi argues that we should still be cautious in our evaluation of the evidence. The implication here is that comparative research on trade unions would be 'deeper' if it also managed to access voices other than those of trade unionists themselves. We would further add that the relevant supplementary voices may not necessarily be exactly the same categories of people in different societies, and that a degree of idiosyncrasy has to be tolerated – and indeed encouraged – in slow comparative research. In other words, a slow comparativist needs to develop an 'always on' mentality, alert to the possibility that valuable background can be acquired in somewhat idiosyncratic ways. A slow comparativist approach, similar to approaches found in ethnographic studies (Mehan, 1979), accepts that all the phases involved in access to the field reveal much information which can become an integral part of the piece of research (Meardi, 2000).

c) part-alienation and reflexiveness

Following from the immersion precept, it is essential that the researcher develops the capacity to distance him/herself sufficiently from the 'socialised rationality' (or

rationalities) of their own (or, for that matter, any other) country, ideally before finalising formal research instruments. This process is indispensable if research is to seek to avoid ethnocentrism. Ethnocentrism often comes from an assumption that 'foreign' societies/systems somehow *should* follow the logics of the researcher's home country, or of dominant societies. This was a characteristic of most early comparative industrial relations research, and remains present in some cases. The 'reverse ethnocentrism' of internalising the logics of a 'preferred' foreign society, or of falling into the classic ethnographer's trap of 'going native', is equally to be avoided, and is something attempts at slow comparison have particularly to guard against. A good slow comparativist needs to develop an understanding of the various social logics relevant to the research questions that s/he is trying to resolve, but needs to inoculate against over-identification. It is difficult to codify how to do this, as it is more of an art than a science, but a degree of 'alienation' needs to be developed from a society that the researcher is already very familiar with (i.e. 'home' countries), and maintained from 'foreign' societies during the process of immersion. These questions also arise in collaborative comparative projects; we return to this point below.

d) the 'federal' nature of comparative projects

Hyman (2001; 2004) has long debated the status of comparative IR research. He makes a distinction between: nomothetic comparative research, which seeks to generate generalisation of an abstract and law-like character, and, we would argue, which in seeking to arrive at generalisations, has a tendency to employ 'fast' strategies and risk failing to be sufficiently 'deep'; and idiographic research, which seeks to gain a holistic understanding of what is contextually unique (2001: 205), and by implication, loses the power of generalisation. He implies that the most 'deep' forms of societal research (Maurice et al, 1986), for example, achieve deep understanding but at the cost of making the actual act of cross-national comparison difficult or impossible. Likewise, for another comparative social methodologist, there is a risk of placing "such great emphasis on social contexts and their specificity, distinctiveness or uniqueness, that meaningful comparisons and generalisations were made very difficult, if not impossible" (Hantrais, 1999: 95). This is a real problem, that both the current authors have encountered separately; an attempt at a 'deep', 'slow' comparison becomes a single country study which is only implicitly comparative, due to the difficulties involved in presenting structures and actor strategies in different societies as 'comparable enough' for comparison to work.

Mitigating against this problem goes back to the foundational 'apples and oranges' question frequently posed to students of comparative research, although it perhaps approaches it from a slightly different angle than the form of 'contextualised comparisons' advocated in Locke and Thelen's (1995) seminal paper. We argue that (slow) comparative projects need to be seen as somewhat 'federal': that it is often

useful to think about fieldwork in different countries as constituting linked, but to some extent separable, projects.

Our argument here is based on a position that non-comparability has in itself to be an object of a comparative research programme. It is important to discover what is absent, as well as what is present, in specific societies; for Anderson “what you will start to notice, if your ears and eyes are open, are the things you can’t see or hear. You will begin to notice what is not there as well as what is there, just as you will become aware of what is unwritten as well as what is written” (2016: 16).

It is often the case that investigating particular spheres of social/economic organisation in any depth reveals that particular structures - or particular ‘strategic action fields’, using the terminology of Fligstein and McAdam (2012) – exist in some places but not in others. For example, in research on the involvement of social actors in regional development led by one of the current authors (Almond et al, forthcoming), geographically-specific social features such as local industrial relations heritage, the existence of nationalist movements, and even the structure of ownership of natural resources caused certain structures for more ‘coordinated’ forms of regional economic globalisation in some places than others. While a comparison of neo-corporatist structures for regional development would make for a very short paper in the most ‘liberal’ economies, failing to attempt to gain a ‘deep’ understanding of the logics behind such structures where they do exist would clearly not make for good comparative research either.

Resolving, or at least mitigating against, the problem of non-comparability requires the slow comparativist to find a means of dancing between the requirement for some degree of ‘meta-comparability’ (i.e. a thematic unity across countries) and societal specifics at a more granular level. A degree of messiness in relation to the demands of positive science for precise comparison has to be tolerated, and indeed encouraged, in these efforts.

Finally, the idea of ‘federal’ projects perhaps might lead some to argue that achieving the types of insight that ‘slow’ comparative research enables might best be done through national researchers/teams simply taking responsibility for research in their home countries. While of course we would encourage the idea of large, team-based comparative research programmes, we do not think that a ‘multi-domestic’ approach really solves the problems that positing a ‘slow’ strategy attempts to deal with. As one prominent social comparative methodologist argues “it is desirable for researchers undertaking comparative studies to have an intimate knowledge of more than one society, their languages and cultures, and this would seem to be almost a prerequisite for embarking on scientifically grounded cross-national research projects adopting the societal approach” (Hantrais, 1999: 101). This, we would argue, to those performing their national component of collective comparative projects, as well

as to those who actively research abroad. A 'slow' comparative project conducted collectively should ideally consist of cross-national collaboration in each of the countries being researched (e.g. co-interviewing, etc.), and be comprised of researchers with significant relevant knowledge of more than one society, including those researching their 'home' countries.

En guise de conclusion

We have attempted to make a case for forms of comparative research on work and employment which engage deeply, and iteratively, with the societies under study, and to present some basic precepts as to how this might be done. We have done this in order to justify forms of comparative research which require long-term engagement with the societies under study, in the rather 'fast' world of the neo-liberal Academy. Funders want fast (in the literal sense) answers, universities want defined projects and rapid publications, and even doctoral students frequently face constraints on their ability to spend long periods of time abroad. Our argument is that a more iterative, less variable-driven, less typology-driven strategy of research is an essential part of the ecology of internationally comparative research.

We do not carry any illusion that the precepts presented here fully resolve the problems of comparability often encountered by those that take context seriously within comparative research. The tension between acquiring deep contextual understanding, and what we refer to as 'meta-comparability' is, very real, and as Hyman (2001) implies, perhaps not fully resolvable. However we hope that this paper provides a defence for obtaining deep contextual understanding in the first place, some basic precepts as to how 'slow' comparativism might achieve this, and some indications as to how research can acknowledge the tension between comparability and non-comparability without being overwhelmed by it.

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