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THE VALUE OF REGIONALLY FOCUSED COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

EL VALOR DEL ANÁLISIS COMPARADO ENFOCADO EN UNA REGIÓN

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Abstract

In this article I propose that “Small N” regionally focused studies have many advantages over “Large N” cross regional studies if we seek detailed analyses that can provide meaningful explanations for political phenomena. Even if the conclusions found in regionally-focused work will be difficult to generalize, in the trade off between intention and generality I choose the former. Cross-regional and regional analysis could certainly inform each other, but having in mind that cross-regional analysis can only establish “thin” relations between certain variables, whose causal relation would require a more detailed and “thick” analysis. As the one provided by regionally-focused studies.

Palabras clave: Regional studies. Comparative politics. Small N studies. Methodology.

Resumen

En este artículo, propongo que los estudios regionales de pocos casos tienen varias ventajas sobre los estudios trans-regionales de muchos casos si lo que buscamos es un análisis detallado que pueda proveer explicaciones ricas para los fenómenos políticos. Incluso si las conclusiones a las que lleguemos en estos estudios regionales de pocos casos sean difíciles de generalizar, en el trade-off entre intención y generalidad, prefiero el primero. Los estudios trans regionales de muchos casos y los regionales por supuesto que pueden nutrirse mutuamente, pero teniendo en cuenta que los primeros solo pueden establecer relaciones "acotadas" (thin) entre ciertas variables, cuya relación causal más precisa requerirá de un análisis más denso (thick). El mismo que puede lograrse con estudios regionales de pocos casos.

Palabras clave: Estudios regionales. Política comparada. N pequeño. Metodología.

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THE VALUE OF REGIONALLY FOCUSED COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Introduction

A cross-regional comparativist (CRC) may question the scholarly value of regionally-focused comparative analysis with these words: *“Scholars who do regionally focused comparative analysis are not doing ‘real’ comparative political science. By just focusing on similar cases, and normally in a small number of them, they are unable to produce universally applicable general laws. The scientific character of the discipline, then, will be missing in their analysis. In order to achieve this scientific goal cross regional comparative analysis, less focused on detail and more on generality and parsimony, has to be developed.”* In this essay I will disagree with this position, proposing that “small n” regionally focused studies have many advantages over “large N” cross regional ones if we seek detailed analyses that can provide meaningful explanations for political phenomena. Even if we agree with the CRC that the conclusions found in regionally-focused work will be difficult to generalize, in the trade off between intention and generality I choose the former.

My argument will be structured in the following way. First, I will reject an “inductive” strategy that would allow regionally-focused analysis to be compatible and harmonious with cross-regional analysis. By explaining why this argument, even if attractive, does not respond to the critique posed by the CRC we will understand the real strength and depth of this challenge. I will then present a response to this challenge that takes “cross-regional” arguments into proper consideration. Next, I will conclude by briefly suggesting a way in which cross-regional and regional analysis could inform each other. However, under this approach cross-regional analysis can only establish “thin” relations between certain variables, whose causal relation would require a more detailed and “thick” analysis, which only regionally-focused studies could provide.

The Limits of “inductive” strategies for harmonizing regionally-focused analysis and cross-regional analysis

There is a ready way in which the regionally-focused comparativist could try to answer the challenge posed by the CRC: he could argue that where the CRC sees a conflict there is none; rather, a bottom-up “inductive” strategy could achieve the universal statements about social phenomena he desires.

The argument is as follows. If the goal is to ascertain general laws that explain and predict human behavior, then these general rules, by definition, will have to apply to any given case study or region. Given the complexity of human societies and the many factors affecting social and political phenomena, the social scientist requires a detailed knowledge of the reality he is observing to determine these rules. If we were some kind of supermen, able to account for all the different variables relevant to a particular social phenomenon, it would be plausible to analyze this phenomenon in any society or societies in the world and immediately generalize our findings. However, as we are not supermen, it would be wise to focus on regions we can study in detail, as this

allows us to better control the relevant variables in play. Regional studies, following a most-similar-systems research design, would allow for an in-depth analysis of a manageable number of similar cases. By focusing on the differences between these similar cases, we would be able to isolate the variables that cause these differences. In this way we will attain general explanations, but only applicable to a particular region.

After this first comparative approach, we can test the generality of our findings to see how well they travel to other regions. By testing our findings in different societies and regions we can confirm our theory, correct it if necessary, or reject it as a general explanation if it cannot explain other relevant cases. This inductive method is a ready strategy that allows us to start from the particular and then ascend to a general, global perspective. As mentioned by Przeworski and Teune (1982, 8), in order to make nomothetic statements our aim will be to replace “proper names” of social systems with variables. Inductive, or bottom-up, analysis starting in a particular region, then, seems to be the wiser approach to attain this goal, especially given the complexities of human societies and our limited capacities as human beings. Instead of opposing regionally-focused analysis, cross-regional analysis will be strengthened if it is inspired by detailed regional analysis.

Here are two examples in which researchers employed this inductive method. In *Capitalist Development and Democracy*, Rueschemeyer, Stephens and Stephens propose a similar approach when analyzing the relation between capitalism and democracy. The authors use a strategy they call “analytic induction,” by which social analysis starts “with thoroughly reflected analytical concerns and then seeks to move from the understanding of one or few cases to potentially generalizable theoretical insights capable of explaining the problematic features of each case. These theoretical generalizations are then tested and retested in other detailed case analysis” (1992, 36). Relying heavily on the West European process of democratization, they present a theory explains the emergence of democracy as a product of the way in which the contradictions of capitalism affect the balance of class power in modernizing societies. This theory is then tested in other developed and underdeveloped regions to confirm its generality.

This bottom-up analysis can also be used to question widely held general rules, as can be seen in the dialogue between recent and past studies of democratic transitions. Michael McFaul in his article “The Fourth Wave of Democracy and Dictatorship” (2002) stresses the important role of civilians in East European transitions to democracy and contrasts it with the less significant role they played in transitions during the “third wave of democracy” in the seventies and eighties. In these past transitions, according to O’Donnell and Schmitter (1986), elites played a more significant role by making pacts that allowed for the transition from an authoritarian to a democratic regime. McFaul argues that the previous theories that explain democratization as an up-down process are not able to account for the differences seen in these new cases, in which social change came from below. By comparing the similarities of the East European cases with the first democratization processes (U.S.A

or France) in which citizen mobilization also played an important role the author concludes that “the successful transitions from communism to democracy may look more like the norm, while the pacted transition from above in Latin America and Southern Europe may look more like the aberration” (2002, 24). He calls, then, for the fusion of both sets of theories in order to provide a comprehensive theory of transitions that can explain variance amongst all these cases. Regional analysis, then, has allowed him to test the adequacy of previously accepted theories of transitions to democracy and help to find general rules that can account for all these cases.

Even if this inductive argument is a good attempt to respond to the challenge of the CRC, it does not do justice to the strength and depth of his claim. The CRC will deny that regional studies can be used as laboratories to discover general rules. The problem with this inductive approach is that its focus on regional detail prevents the possibility of attaining generality. For this generality to be attained a more parsimonious approach is necessary.

How does our regional analysis affect generality? By looking closely to particular cases, we do not focus on the search for variables across different social systems, but the particular variables that are playing a role in the regional cases in question. Normally, due to the nature of this research, this means paying special attention to the variables that explain the differences in these specific cases. Consequentially, these concepts will often be difficult or impossible to translate into other societies where these specific variables are less significant or not present.

In both our previous examples, we can see this problem. Even if we accept the claim of the authors of *Capitalist Development and Democracy* that they have achieved generality amongst the West European and U.S. cases, it is clear that the authors have problems “translating” their general theory to apply to their Central and South American cases. In order to explain the emergence of democracy in these regions, they claim that the interaction between land owning classes and lower classes and their allies are important to explain how capitalist development caused democracy to emerge. I see two problems with this account. First, landowning classes seem to be taken as unified in their resistance to the emergence of democracy, when a closer look shows different factions within these classes responding to social changes in diverse ways. Second, it is not clear how the alliance between middle classes and working classes in Latin America provide a similar interaction as the one produced by organized lower classes and their allies in the European case studies. These brief examples show how difficult it can be to translate a theory if our methodological framework has been determined by the inductive analysis of a particular set of cases.

In the case of McFaul’s analysis of transitions we can see how, even if he asks for a general theory of transitions and democratization, in the last paragraphs of his article he almost dismisses this possibility due to the particularities he has found in his research. The resistance to Soviet imperialism, the strength of the official party, and the ideological polarization between the U.S. and the USSR are all factors that play a special role in this particular region. Not to mention the historical context, which

“may create unique factors for and against democratization” (2002, 244). What really seems to be the case is that we are not facing clearly comparable phenomena, but different ones, not only influenced by diverse relevant factors in each region, but also conditioned by their different historical contexts. In a time of mass communication that can amplify the impact of public demonstrations, and when collective action is more easily organized, citizen protest will likely play a more important role than it did twenty years ago in Latin America, for example. In this way, the author is highlighting the kind of problems the CRC predicts we will find when we try to translate regional conclusions into general comprehensive rules.

The challenge of the CRC, then, is a strong one because he rightly points out certain limitations of regional studies. If the goal of political science is to provide general explanations and predictions for political phenomena, regional studies cannot meet this goal due to their specific nature. Even more, the CRC is fully aware of the limitations of his own position: he understands that he sacrifices depth for breadth. Paraphrasing Przeworski and Teune, our CRC will accept that he cannot talk about “apples” and “oranges” but just fruit (1982, 10).

To achieve this generality, he will broaden his concepts so they can include many different phenomena under them. Being parsimonious, he will concentrate on the common systemic factors that play a role in explaining particular social phenomena across regions. In order to make this selection, the CRC will prefer a “most-different-system” analysis. This is the case because this kind of analysis allows him to reject as irrelevant any factors that are not common to the social systems in question, and to concentrate only on the common ones.

As such, to defend the validity of regional studies we cannot assume that there is no conflict between the two approaches. On the contrary, we have to recognize that the CRC is highlighting some significant limitations in regionally-focused analysis. The challenge, however, can be reversed, and we can ask the CRC why is it of greater scholarly value to find general rules that cannot provide us with much substantive content about the phenomena under study. How much detail are we willing to sacrifice in order to achieve this generality? Why should we prefer “thin” accounts of social phenomena if we can aim for “thick” ones, in which we can provide a more detailed account of the variables in play?

Without denying the importance of cross-regional analyses, the regionally-focused comparativist can stress their inherent limitations in that they cannot provide accounts of social phenomena that do justice to the complexity of human societies. From this point of view, the regional approach appears to be a more valid and rich—a middle point between the specificity of particular country studies and the generality of cross-regional analysis. The regional comparativist, then, can reply to Przeworski and Teune by stressing the value in speaking of apples and oranges and not just fruit. When we talk only about fruit we lose the deeper meanings and differences that are important for a comprehensive understanding of the phenomena under study.

Giovanni Sartori (1970) precisely criticizes this preference for generality that sacrifices meaningful and rich details. According to this author, aiming for the generality that the CRC seeks has costs, and we must be conscious of how these costs affect our inquiry. In climbing what he calls a “ladder of abstraction,” our concepts gain generality but also lose content by “lessening its properties and attributes” (1970, 1041). Sartori considers that there are three levels of abstraction: high level, medium level and low level. For example, at the bottom of the ladder we will find particular lions, at a medium level we abstract to lions in general, and at a higher level to that of felines. In our discussion, cross-regional studies aim at the higher levels of abstraction, while regional studies aim at a medium level. Country studies, focused in particularity and that do not aim to dialogue with broader theories, correspond to the lower levels.

By deciding to do regional studies and stay in the medium level of abstraction we are certainly falling “short of universality,” as we will just produce general propositions applicable to the specific region under study (Sartori, 1970, 1041). Even if these propositions provide us with a comparative understanding of certain phenomena, they are too specific to be universal. However, this option to keep a medium level of abstraction allows us to provide concepts with a richer connotation. Most-similar-systems research designs will allow us to concentrate in the variances amongst very similar systems, providing a closer and richer account of the way in which certain systemic factors cause this variability.

To provide an example, we can see strong similarities in the way elites in Arabic kingships have developed strategies to respond to different social and religious tensions in the region. In order to maintain stable political systems these states use their abundant resources to support different policy strategies (no taxation, direct public loans, social benefits) toward a similar goal: strengthening social relations and defusing potential social conflicts. We can compare these different strategies and provide certain general propositions about the factors that account for their success or failure. However, when we try to generalize these propositions to other systems in which non-elected rulers also use resources to maintain their power, we will find that the specific characteristics of these cases make this generalization impossible. A Saudi King will be a very different ruler than an African Warlord, or than an authoritarian ruler in an East European state. The basis of their legitimacy, their opposing factions, the availability of resources, or the kind of social crises that have to be defused, vary greatly from region to region. So, if we decide to climb the ladder of abstraction to provide a universal proposition about the success or failure of policies used by non-elected elites to maintain power, our propositions will lose their original force.

There is another problem with the most-different-system research design, privileged by the CRC. Just as the regional scholar can be criticized for having his mind focused in particularities that will prevent him from attaining generality, the cross-regional scholar, given his preference for parsimony and general rules, can be criticized for putting too much attention to common factors and

disregarding significant particularities. When they apply these general rules to particular cases, cross-regional scholars often end up forcing cases to conform to their theories, even when they expose problems with their theories.

The position of the CRC is certainly more complicated than that of the regional scholar. The regional comparativist can avoid making mistaken generalizations based on particular cases by recognizing the limited scope of his findings. By the nature of his analysis, the CRC has to include under his general rules even those relevant cases that do not fit properly in his theory. If he wants to qualify them as anomalies he will have to accept that his theory is not as general as he claims. As such he falls prey to his own criticisms.

In the case of Michael Ross's article "Does oil hinders democracy?" for example the author concludes that oil and mineral resources negatively affect democracy. By comparing oil and mineral exporting countries and their democratic performances cross-regionally, he finds that these countries normally have a weaker democratic performance than other countries without these resources. When presenting his conclusions he includes Chile and Peru, as they are mineral producing countries, and suggests that they are weak democracies because they belong to this general category. The conclusion has no ground. The relation may be meaningful in some of the Middle Eastern and African countries in his study, but not in these two cases. First, the argument does not do justice to the democratic performance of these countries. In the Chilean case we do not see bad democratic performance recently enough for it to be categorized as a weak democracy. In the Peruvian case, democracy may have had recent problems, but not in a comparable degree to most of the other cases presented (Nigeria, Saudi Arabia, etc). Even more, there is little evidence that, in recent years, mineral resources have had a significant and negative effect on democracy in Chile and Peru. Second, Chile and Peru have no worse democratic performance than other South American countries that do not produce oil or minerals. Ross' theory will lead us to believe that this other states should have stronger democracies because they have no mineral resources, which is not the case. Why does Ross claim these cases support his theory? The problem seems to be that if he recognizes these cases are anomalies, the theory will lack generality. Consequentially, Ross' cross-regional quantitative focus predisposed his analysis of Chile and Peru making him assert that they confirm his theory, even though closer scrutiny proves him wrong.

Do these difficulties in bridging cross-regional and regional analysis mean that the two methods have nothing to gain from each other? This is not the case. As discussed, both these approaches have different strengths. Cross-regional analysis can use the particular case studies and regional studies to find flaws in their general theories and work to perfect them. Cross-regional analysis can lead to general propositions that, even if they do not provide detailed causal explanations, can demonstrate relationships between variables or disprove existing general rules. The regional

comparativist can use these findings to direct his study and turn his attention to variables he may have overlooked when analyzing particular cases of the phenomena in question.

However, the regionalist scholar cannot gain greater knowledge about the causal relation between the variables presented in cross- regional theories without more in-depth analysis. A more detailed analysis is required to determine the causal relation between these variables in particular cases. This analysis may even lead to a rejection or modification of the general theory by showing how some other variables significant to that region may have been overlooked by the CRC due to its focus on generality.

As such, in my opinion, regional analysis will have greater scholarly value than cross-regional analysis. The former, even if not able to deliver general rules, can provide rich and meaningful accounts of political phenomena. As we have seen, cross-regional analysis can only establish “thin” relations between certain variables, whose causal relation would require a more detailed and “thick” analysis as the one provided by regional analysis. In consequence, against the challenge of the CRC, we can confidently reply that the richness of our concepts is more informative of real political phenomena, despite the generality we may lose.

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Objetivo

Esta maestría busca formar investigadores con destrezas teóricas y metodológicas para afrontar el estudio de los distintos fenómenos sociales de los que se ocupa la Política Comparada, entendida como un sub campo de la Ciencia Política.

¿A quién va dirigida?

La maestría va dirigida a profesionales de las Ciencias Sociales en general y de la Ciencia Política en particular, interesados en mejorar su bagaje teórico y habilidades metodológicas para describir e interpretar los problemas clave de la vida política de los distintos países de América Latina.

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