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Multi-method Research in Comparative Politics and Political Theory

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Introduction

How does the combination of different methods improve the quality of our research in comparative politics and political theory? The paper discusses some issues related to the use of multi-method research in both fields.

Multi-method approaches, and the flexibility and pragmatism that are often associated with them, are a very welcome development in comparative politics. Methodological versatility and pragmatism lend themselves well to 'problem-driven' research (Shapiro 2005), that is, encourage a perspective that is likely to produce more real-world relevant findings. Moreover, problem-driven research represents a clear progress from alternative standards such as 'data-oriented' (a problem is chosen for analysis because of data availability, often in large-N, quantifiable format), or 'method-oriented' research (a problem is chosen for analysis because it can be analyzed with certain –often quantitative—methods) (Shapiro et al. 2002). Not least because of the preferability of 'problem-driven' research to other standards, it is worthwhile analyzing what the possible methodological tradeoffs involved in multi-method research –often implied by a problem-driven perspective- are.

In fact, if a problem is chosen for analysis because of its 'importance' (however defined), then the methodological choices are secondary and consequential: the 'best' methods for analysis of a certain problem will be chosen, independently on what they are. In comparative politics, this often amounts to a 'multi-method' approach, combining several (often both quantitative and qualitative)[1] methods of analysis in the same research design. Again, this is a very desirable development in the field. It does have many benefits, from encouraging researchers to be conversant in different methodological languages, and therefore to be more aware of the limitation of each method, to increasing –in general- the overall confidence in one's findings. Yet, while combining methods is often a winning strategy to increase the overall quality of a research project, some tensions and tradeoffs accompany the many strong points of multi-method strategies. At the epistemological level, comparativists using multi-method research abide often to a pragmatic view of science, preserving the importance of causal explanations but combining several models of explanation from nomological (more or less bounded) to

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[1] I don't include here the combination between formal modeling and statistical analysis, which also constitutes a methodological 'mix', which however has a completely different valence and has a longer tradition (Goldthorpe 2001). Also, I will focus my attention mostly on the combination between case studies and 'large N' statistical analysis, rather than between the former and formal modeling (e.g. Bates et al 1998; Levi 2000 and 2002).

the specific analysis of unobservables such as causal mechanisms. Some tensions instead may emerge in the concrete application of mixed methods to a specific type of research design, in particular mid-range comparisons. The first part of the paper discusses those.

In political theory[2] 'problems' relate to a number of internal intellectual traditions loosely grouped under its rubric. One of them calls upon philosophical attempts to clarify concepts and present arguments and normative prescriptions where an ethical defect in social arrangements may be located. A second focuses on the ideas of major, often unique, theorists and philosophers whose work has contributed centrally to identifying problems in political life and organization, when their work is critically used as a template or model. A third examines the multiple receptions and interpretations bestowed on textual artefacts of political thinking, implying that the comprehension of the political relates as much to the consumption as to the production of ideas. And a fourth identifies political concepts and the theoretical and ideological structures they create and recreate as an arena of major insight into the nature of political thinking. In each case the importance of the tradition relates to the conventionalized 'sanctity' of the unit of analysis. The genius of major political philosophers may offer problematics in terms of testing the validity of their solutions over time; indeed, the continuity or discontinuity of their arguments may itself constitute the problematic. Alternatively, immediate or long standing issues of distribution or liberty have constituted perennial foci of themes and arguments. To a growing extent, however, the problems of political theory are seen to concern matters of interpretation and of linguistic and conceptual indeterminacy, as the last two traditions indicate. Those second order problems are those of meaningful scholarship, but they relate to the identification of important first order substantive issues.

The traditions of political theory usually occupy separate research spheres, and the challenge for political theory lies in the very identification of the often unstated epistemologies and ideologies behind each of them, and consequently in ascertaining which combinations of methods drawn from each of the above-mentioned approaches may improve the quality of analysis at the disposal of political theorists. Political theorists do not, as a rule, spend too much time on the methods and epistemologies that underlie their work. When they are focused on epistemology, it is that of their subject-matter

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[2] Unless indicated to the contrary, the term 'political theory' is employed here to refer to the first order construction and second order study of political ideas, while acknowledging that empirical political scientists also engage in the construction and study of theories.

rather than that underlying their own methods. Some political philosophers even make a virtue of rejecting the relevance of methodological awareness to a sphere they see as enunciating universal truths or simply clarifying concepts. Other political theorists, to the contrary—true to the tradition of the history of political thought—have become wedded to contextualist and particular interpretations. They emphasize situational uniqueness where analytical and ethical philosophers demand the imposition of generalities; and they see indeterminacy where philosophers seek precision. The problem here with mixing methods (a procedure that is in its infancy for political theorists) is to fertilize the separate epistemologies of each approach by identifying the complementary work one tradition might perform for another and ascertaining what has to happen for those epistemologies to intersect. Beyond that, however, although the unfortunate epistemic gap between political theory and political science seems as wide as ever, there may be points of epistemic contact beneficial to both sides of the divide. That is also briefly explored below.

The paper proceeds as follows. The first part discusses some approaches to comparative politics research that recommend the combination of different methods of analysis to arrive at more robust findings. The section reviews these approaches and discusses the methodological tradeoffs that they entail. The second part identifies different units of analysis used by political theorists and their epistemological underpinnings, employing a distinction between first and second order political theory. Through a case study of negotiation, it suggests ways in which approaches may be combined and the different work such combinations do.

Mixed Methods in Comparative Politics

The adoption of a 'multiple methods' research design is rapidly becoming a new methodological standard in comparative politics. Several recent publications have advocated the simultaneous use of methodologies and tools typically coming from different traditions of research: qualitative (comparative, case studies), quantitative, formal theory, etc. The common goal of these proposals is to overcome the limitations inherent in each single methodological approach by complementing them with other approaches. Beyond this general common aspiration, however, the proposals present several dissimilarities in the kind of 'mix' they advocate, and consequently in their overall strengths and weaknesses and their applicability to different research objectives. The simultaneous use of different methods in comparative politics does not only compensate

in a general sense for the weaknesses of single-method research by means of a more complete and flexible research strategy. At least in some versions, multi-method research has the specific potential to estimate causal effects by means of the examination of statistical regularities between relevant variables with the appropriate tools, as well as to describe causal mechanisms by means of the evidence-rich research which is typical of intensive case studies.

<u>Mixed methods as an emerging standard</u>
It is an easy prediction that in the coming few years the combination of different methods (in particular statistical and case study methods) in the same research design will rise to a new methodological standard for comparative politics. One only has to peruse the recent methodological contributions in the field. Coppedge (2005) advocates 'nested inference'. George and Bennett (2005), in their influential textbook on case study methods and theory development, make repeatedly clear that integration of different methods is desirable and perhaps necessary; Lieberman (2005), in what promises to become a landmark methodological piece for future comparative politics research, elaborates at length the procedures of 'nested research'; influential research papers such as Bennett and Braumoeller's (2002) also explore the advantages and implications of 'mixing methods'; Rihoux (2006) puts forward a case for combining 'qualitative' and 'quantitative' methods; Brady and Collier' s *Refining Social Inquiry* (2004; see also Brady, Collier and Seawright 2006), a collection of important rebuttals to King et al.'s influential volume (1994), also strongly endorses the use of multiple methods in the same research and the bridging of 'qualitative' and 'quantitative' modes of research in political science. Munck and Snyder (2007) find a substantial amount of 'multi-method' comparative politics articles in their review of the field during recent years. Shapiro, in his important theoretical, methodological and epistemological work on political science (Shapiro et al. 2002; Shapiro 2005) advocates explicitly the ideal of 'methodological pragmatism' and 'multi-tasking'. Multi-method research in comparative politics is becoming the object on an increasing number of APSA panels (especially organized by the Qualitative Methods Section, and ad hoc conferences (COMPASSS). Handbooks on mixed methods (Tashakkori 1997), once typical of more applied social sciences (such as medical research or epidemiology) are becoming more relevant to comparative political scientists. A new Sage journal (*Journal of Mixed Method Research*), forthcoming in 2007, is explicitly addressed to scholars across the social sciences.

This is in general a very welcome development. While the interest of the findings depend on the actual problem studied, *ceteris paribus* the application and the creative use of different methods of analysis to a problem can yield 'better' (more interesting, complete, innovative) findings than if the researcher restrict him/herself to using a single method. In particular, what statistical analysis can offer in terms of capturing and simplifying complex associations between variables in large data sets, can be greatly enriched by the contextual information and more nuanced account of processes and interactions that case study research can achieve, and which is largely forfeited by large-N statistical analysis. Each can compensate for the other method's weaknesses and contribute to the overall findings of the study with its own strengths. This allows in principle more flexible and articulated research designs, which are more likely to do justice of the complex problems of political research. Moreover, by using different methods simultaneously, researchers can analyze different facets of such problems and systematically take into consideration different kinds of data, which would be impossible to do in single-method research. In addition, the awareness of the strength and weaknesses of a range of methods allows researchers to frame problems differently, as they can immediately refer to the right methodological tools to analyze different facets of the same problems. This practice may even lead to the analysis of questions which on average possess more real-world relevance: if a researcher is routinely trained in different methods, she will look at a problem differently, and pose potentially more articulated, original and interesting questions, which account for more traits of the phenomena being studied.[3]

Causal effects and causal mechanisms

The emphasis on the estimation of causal effects (the impact of X on Y) or the description of causal mechanisms (the micro-processes linking cause and effect) has been

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[3] A possible risk of this state of affairs may however be that mixed methodology in comparative politics becomes another form of 'methodological standard' dominating the field, like regression analysis in the 1960s and 1970s, and rational choice analysis in the 1980s and later. To be sure, preaching a flexible, pluralistic, methodological standard is probably superior than trying to fit all political reality and all interesting problems in the strictures of *one* specific method or set of methods. And yet, it seems to me that all 'methodological standards', if what they translate into is some form of method-driven research (i.e.: something is not deemed to be publishable if it doesn't include more than one method for the same research), are undesirable developments and should be avoided if possible. One way to pre-empt this risk is to explore the epistemological foundations of this kind of research, to see what limitations, what tradeoffs, what hard choices they impose on researchers, and not least, under what epistemological conditions different methods can meaningfully coexist in the same piece of research.

typical of different traditions of political research.[4] Positivists deriving their epistemological canons from the work of Hempel (1942, 1965) strived for the identification of general regularities between variables, basing exclusively on the analysis of observable entities. The important methodological contributions of Przeworski and Teune (1970) and King et al. (1994), only to quote a few, belong to this epistemological tradition. Researchers in this tradition typically use quantitative methods, which are the best-equipped to identify such regularities. Criticisms of this view have been leveled at different levels: ontologically, some scholars have emphasized the complex, non-linear nature of the political world (e.g. Zuckerman 1997; Hall 2003; Pierson 2004; see also the symposium on Causal complexity and qualitative methods in *Political Analysis* 3/2006); at the epistemological level, some have stressed the difficulty of getting to universal generalizations in the social sciences (e.g. Merton 1957; Boudon 1991) or remarked the unsatisfactory nature of the ascertainment of statistical regularities for a full causal account of political phenomena[5], which leaves the *why* question unanswered (e.g. Walt 1981; Hedstroem and Swedberg 1989; George and Bennett 2005); at the methodological level, many have stigmatized the excessive narrowness of statistical methods (as able to process only a certain kind of data- countable, homogeneous and numerous observations) to capture the multiform nature of political phenomena, the data on which most of the time cannot be organized in a large-N, 'flat' dataset that can be processed statistically (e.g. Shapiro et al 2002; Brady and Collier 2004).

In this context, mixed method research has the flexibility that is required potentially *both* to estimate of causal effects within a certain universe *and* to describe the causal mechanisms that underpin them. In the remainder of this section, I discuss two of the many research protocols involving the combination of different methods that have been advanced in recent years, focusing namely on their potential for the double task mentioned above of rendering a valid account of both causal effects and causal mechanisms.

The two research protocols that I discuss in this paper have different lineages as well as different characteristics. Nested analysis (Lieberman 2005) dovetails nicely with the production in comparative and qualitative methodology of the recent years (e.g. Brady and Collier 2004—see also the symposium in *Political Analysis* 3/2006) on the

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[4] This obviously does not exhaust the whole range of traditions in political research: some, like hermeneutics or post-modernism, refuse the idea of causality as applicable to the social sciences *tout court*.

[5] In its original formulation, orthodox positivist epistemology rejects the concept of causality in favour of that of association between phenomena.

possibilities of expanding and combining the methods used in comparative research. This was mainly driven by the need to achieve methodological innovation as well as to overcome the inherent limitations of 'small-N' case studies, in particular in relation to two different and connected problems: the representativeness (external validity) of a certain set of cases selected for in-depth analysis, and the criteria for selecting the cases for analysis. The 'methodological pragmatism' proposed by Shapiro and Wendt (See Shapiro and Wendt 2005; Shapiro 2005) takes its lead instead from the advocacy of a shift of emphasis from 'method-', 'data-' and 'theory-driven' to 'problem-driven' research: if the starting point of a research process is the willingness of a researcher to make sense of a certain problem which has real-world relevance, the use of methods is instrumental to that end, and hence the combination of different methods is a likely (if not necessary) result. In the remainder of this section, I discuss briefly the two approaches in question, and then assess their performance in accounting for causal effects and mechanisms in the context of what is probably the most typical research design in comparative politics: mid-range comparison.

<u>A structured combination of statistics and case studies: 'nested analysis'.</u>
In a recent article, Lieberman illustrates one of the possible research design strategies that involve the use of statistical and case study methods, which he calls 'nested analysis' (Lieberman 2005). In synthesis, Lieberman sees two roles for comparative case studies (Small-N analysis-SNA) vis-à-vis statistical analysis (Large-N analysis -LNA): a stronger testing of the statistical model, on the one hand, and a contribution to model-building, on the other. The ultimate goal is to combine Large-N analysis (LNA) and Small-N analysis in such a way that 'the analytic payoff is greater than the sum of the parts' (Lieberman 2005, 436).

The research process of nested analysis consists of several steps. The first step is always the analysis of key variables on a large universe of cases (large-N analysis, LNA). Fitting the appropriate statistical model to the large universe provides insights about rival explanations, and offers a picture of the general patterns between the variable of interest and several plausible explanatory factors. At this stage there are two possibilities:

1. if the results of the model are satisfactory and robust, the researchers selects some of the cases that are best explained by the model to carry out a 'model-testing SNA' (Mt-SNA). The analysis of such cases will concentrate on the mechanisms connecting the various explanatory variables to the explanandum, so

to complement the estimation of causal effects obtained by the large-N model with the more in-depth analysis of the microfoundation of the model. It is possible that the case will reveal the no such connections exist, and at that stage the researcher can either choose a different case for SNA, discarding the first one as idiosyncratic, or respecify the model used in the LNA (see below).

2. if the results of the LNA are not satisfactory, then the role of the SNA is a different one: that of building a better model (Mb-SNA). The researcher will choose both cases that are well explained and outliers to discover new variables that may help to increase the explanatory power and the robustness of the LNA results, rerunning the LNA after having respecified the model accordingly.

The iterations are repeated until the SNA confirms and complements the LNA, or it is clear that no generalization is possible and the analysis (at least in this form) is abandoned.

Methodological pragmatism and scientific realism

Ian Shapiro, in his coauthored essay with Alexander Wendt on realism (now in Shapiro 2005, chapter 2) explicitly connects an epistemological view with research practice, advocating a 'scientific realist' position. Unlike positivists, realists believe that 'unobservable entities' exist, and that every observation is theory-laden. However, on the latter topic, they contend that observation is not theory-determined, which distinguishes realism from the more pure forms of hermeneutics and interpretivism. Social action, self-understandings, meanings, social conventions etc. are constituted by larger causal processes (e.g. socialization, power relations, capitalism, sovereignty etc.) which are diffuse enough and last enough to be analyzed beyond an interpretive approach (see also George and Bennett 2005). Finally, causal mechanisms are the key object of social science —which sets realism apart from both positivists (who focus on correlations and causal effects) and interpretivists (who in most cases reject the very idea of causality). Causation is a relation between mechanism and outcome, not a deductive conclusion from a premise, like in the positivist 'deductive-nomological' model.

As mechanisms are unobservable, the key activity in scientific realist research is the 'inference to the best explanation' (e.g. Eco and Sebeok 1983), going from the observed effects to the unobservable causes, basing such inference on a particular theory which is chosen to apply to the particular case or cases studied. This epistemology squares very

well with a 'problem-driven' approach to empirical research, according to which science starts from questions about reality (which generally have counterintuitive aspects); the scientist's goal is to describe the causal mechanisms by reference to which these questions can be answered; there is no fixed methodological repertoire, and methods are chosen in order to investigate the aspects and analyze the data that provide most evidence for the mechanisms which, according to theory, are hypothesized to connect cause and effect. Shapiro and Wendt exemplify this research protocol with detailed reference to John Gaventa's study on power relations in a Appalachian Valley (Gaventa 1980), showing how Gaventa uses historical, comparative, field and quasi-experimental evidence and methods to illuminate the mechanisms posited by the theory (Lukes' third dimension of power; Lukes 1973).

Bounded generalizations and comparative politics

The aim of this part of the paper is to assess the performance of the two mixed-method protocols summarized above in the context of bounded generalizations. In order to do this, a case for mid-range comparison is in order. Mid-range comparison, broadly defined as a comparison including from two-three cases to all cases belonging to a certain homogeneous universe (often geographically and/or temporally delimited), is probably the kind of research design which is most common in comparative politics-but its legitimisation goes beyond its mere recurrence in the field. This section summarizes two of the main arguments in favour of mid-range comparison: the possibility of constructing concepts (and therefore theories) which allow at the same time comparison and empirical measurement, and the possibility of identifying the conditions in which similar causal mechanisms are at play. They both contribute to the attainment of unit homogeneity (e.g. Munck 2004) which is what founds the validity of the 'bounded generalizations' which are the typical result of mid-range comparisons.

The choice for mid-range comparisons is located in an epistemological debate as well: should we aim for universal theory, in comparative politics, or not? Should we aim to produce universal generalizations that apply across time and space, or is that an ultimately unattainable goal, which should lead us to concentrate on contextualized research? The debate on these issues is vast, and cannot be accounted for here. Simplifying things a little, three positions are recognizable. First, some authors contend that generalization is the goal of comparative research. The key authors here are

Przeworski and Teune, who in their 1970 book on *The Logic of Comparative Social Inquiry* advocate a generalizing goal for comparative research, which is summarized in the oft-quoted sentence 'substitute names of variables for the names of social systems' (the latter being linked to some *context*, such as countries, or areas, periods etc. -*ibidem*, 8). They are quite candid in advocating a strong nomological epistemological standard for comparative politics: 'The pivotal assumption of this analysis is that social science research, including comparative inquiry, should and can lead to general statements about social phenomena. This assumption implies that human or social behaviour can be explained in terms of general laws established by observation. Introduced here as an expression of preference, this assumption will not be logically justified' (Przeworski and Teune 1970, 4).

Some authors instead hold the diametrically opposite view: social science theories are inevitably local and partial, and conditioned by spatial-temporal coordinates. Knapp, for example, maintains that only theories that specify clearly their boundary conditions attain scientific status, namely falsifiability in the Popperian sense (Knapp 1984, quoted in Panebianco 1989). A similar position is supported by Little (1993), who criticises the 'nomological' view of the social sciences, and maintains that regularities in the social sciences are by definition bounded, deriving 'from features of individual agency in the context of specific social arrangements' (Little 1993, 184).

A third position is instead that whether an explanation of a certain phenomenon is generalizable is itself an empirical question. This inductivist position (Shapiro 2004, 2005) does not refuse generalization per se, quite the contrary. While looking for general accounts is a worthy enterprise, there is no guarantee that this objective is generally attainable, and therefore it cannot constitute a standard for scientific research. In particular, generalizing should not prejudice the validity of the explanation itself, nor should the ready availability of 'good' data or the competence on specific techniques drive the choice of the problem to be studies as supposedly 'generalizable'.[6] In the explanation of some phenomena, such as the emergence of democracy, we know that there is equifinality, and therefore no generalization is possible.[7] However, in other cases generalization may be possible and we should try to achieve for it, being careful however

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[6] As Shapiro shows, the existence of such data, which can be processed with 'appropriate' techniques, doesn't even guarantee that generalizability is actually attained. He gives the example of the research program on forecasting the results of presidential elections in the US (2005, 194-195).
[7] Democracy can emerge by gradual evolution, imitation, 'contagion' effects, collapses of authoritarian regimes, revolution, imposition from above by internal elites, military occupation and external imposition, etc. (Shapiro, 2005, 193).

to represent and frame the problem studied in such a way that is not distorted to be subsumed into a 'general' theory that does not do justice to the real complexity of the phenomenon studied (Shapiro 2005, ch.5).[8]

This third position seems to be what is at the basis of the option for mid-range comparisons by many comparativists, and describes more accurately than the other two the current state of the discipline, in which broad studies coexist with small-N and case study analyses. More specifically, as mentioned before, the arguments founding mid-range comparisons are (at least) two, and refer to concept analysis and the conditions for the identification of similar causal mechanisms.

General theories will have to be constructed by general concepts, which apply independently from spatial and temporal constraints. Forming such concepts and still retaining the empirical nature of a theory is no easy task. In his seminal work on concept analysis and formation, Sartori stresses that 'climbing the ladder of abstraction' up to the 'universal' level of generalization may be in many cases problematic. In Sartori's well-known scheme, concepts are formed at different levels of abstraction, given by different equilibria between the intension (given by the attributes of the concept) and extension (realm of empirical applicability of the concept). Intension and extension, also called connotation and denotation, are in an inverse relationship. Increasing the intension of the concept allows more differentiated and fine-grained analysis which is grounded in a context, but limits the scope of empirical applicability of the term-in other words, the categories so constructed only allow very limited comparisons, and at the limit they only apply to one context (one case). The inverse operation, the reduction of the intension of a concept increases its range of applicability, allowing broader comparisons. This 'climbing the ladder of abstraction' from less to more general concepts may become problematic in the very last 'steps', namely when the researcher aims to build truly general concepts that apply independently from spatial and temporal constraints, to build truly global generalizations of the kind advocated by Przeworski and Teune. The risk here is that of building 'empty containers', that is, concepts that cannot be defined in a precise enough way to lead to a satisfactory operationalization, and therefore allow empirical research.[9] Sartori does not deny the possibility to climb the ladder of

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[8] Shapiro devotes several pages to the critique of 'theory-driven research', the gist of which is exactly the undue simplification and distortion of phenomena to subsume them under a 'general' law. See Shapiro (2005, chapters 2 and 5).

[9] Sartori maintains that this is the case of concepts that are so general that they don't have a definition *a contrario*. The example he gives is that of 'group' in the context of 'group theory'. The theory never

abstraction all the way up to the maximum level of generality, but emphasizes the difficulties of such operation. In this sense, his position is in principle similar to the inductivist one held by Shapiro.

Where comparative politics is on a much more solid ground to build theories with the due standards of conceptual and definitional clarity and the necessary precision to guide research on empirical data is at the level of the mid-range generalizations. This is the realm of what we have called here 'bounded generalizations'[10]. As explained in table 1 below, Sartori sees these as appropriate for intra-area comparisons, between relatively homogeneous cases (contexts). This does not set strict limits to the kind of generalizations that concepts formed at a middle range of abstraction can achieve: as Sartori explains, the middle row of table 1 can contain comparisons covering many to few cases, and the intension/extension equilibrium achieved there can range substantially from rather abstract concepts (where the extension of the denotation does however not run the risk of obfuscating its connotation and therefore the operationalizability) to rather specific concepts (where cross-case travelling and comparison are still possible).

Table 1. Ladder of Abstraction

Levels of abstraction	Major comparative scope and purpose	Logical and empirical properties of concepts
High Level categories Universal conceptualizations	Cross-area comparisons among heterogeneous contexts (global theory)	Maximal extension Minimal intension Definition by negation
Medium level categories. General conceptualizations and taxonomies	Intra-area comparisons among relatively homogeneous contexts (middle-range theory)	Balance of denotation with connotation Definition by analysis, i.e. per genus et differentiam
Low level categories Configurative conceptualizations	Country-by-country analysis	Maximal intension Minimal extension Contextual definition

(Adapted from Sartori 1970)

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makes fully clear what is *not* a group, and therefore ends up with a complete disjunction between its theoretical apparatus and the empirical analysis conducted by researchers (Sartori 1970, 1979).

[10] I prefer using this label rather than 'middle-range theories' in order not to confuse the generalizations which are in question here, and which refer to the establishment of temporal and spatial boundaries to the applicability of the generalizations with the original formulation of 'middle range theories by Merton (Merton 1957). Merton saw middle-range theories as capable of 'federating' different findings in different contexts, subsuming them under a more general theory, rather than determining spatio-temporal boundaries of applications of generalizations (see also Boudon 1991). There are significant points of contact between Sartori's and Merton's mid-range theories, but those would require a discussion that would go beyond the scope of this paper.

Bounded generalizations, moreover, seem to be preferable to universal ones in comparative politics also from the point of view of an approach that values the analysis of causal mechanisms in the explanation of political phenomena.[11] As mentioned before, the quest for the analysis of causal mechanisms is increasingly becoming a required standard in comparative politics, particularly in mixed method research. The problem is how to reconcile the analysis of mechanisms, which 'makes no claim to generality' (Elster 1989, 13) with *comparative* analysis. Needless to say, the same correlational regularity can be sustained by different mechanisms in different contexts, and this is an interesting finding in itself. However, in the context of bounded generalizations, an even more interesting finding is to buttress them with the discovery of similar mechanisms (or concatenation of mechanisms –Gambetta 1991) supporting the same causal effect in different contexts.

Whether this can be attained is an empirical question; in a recent article, Johnson (2006) offers what he calls a 'pragmatist' critique to positivism (with particular reference to the methodological theses advanced by King et al. 1994). Johnson does not propose a fully-fledged alternative epistemology to the one advanced by King et al., but advances the case for a causal explanation based on the analysis of causal mechanisms. As he defines them, '…a mechanism **m** is a usually unobservable component of some more encompassing theory T. It typically operates at an analytical level below that which T seeks to explain and makes T more credible in the sense that m renders more fine-grained the explanations that T generates' (Johnson 2006, 247)[12]. The fact that mechanisms may be many and are typically unobservable, however, does not necessarily mean that no generalization is possible. On the contrary, the working hypothesis that mechanisms may well operate in the same way under the same conditions (Machamer et al. 2000, quoted in Johnson 2006, 247) is well worth pursuing and seems to be implicit in a mixed methodology that aims to complement the estimation of causal effects with the analysis of the causal mechanisms underpinning them.

Johnson's position can be read as a further support for middle-range generalizations in comparative politics. The same mechanisms are likely to be at play in cases where homogeneous contextual conditions exist. For example, the dynamics of party competition in multi-party systems seems to respond to a limited number of mechanisms

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[11] A classical text on mechanisms is Elster (1989). Probably the most encompassing analysis of different kinds of causal mechanisms in the social sciences is the collection by Hedstroem and Swedberg (1991).

[12] Johnson does not take position on the issue of whether mechanisms operate necessarily at the individual level (ibidem 247; See also Stinchcombe 1991)

(vote-maximization, office-pursuit, policy-making – Stroem 1991) created by the political actors, and if we limit the comparison to, say, European party systems, we may be able both to find causal regularities and to have reasonable confidence that these mechanisms will be the main ones driving the general patterns identified by the comparison. If we extend the comparison to multi-party systems in other areas, for example Africa (for those countries that have them) we may well not find the same mechanisms underpinning higher-level regularities (e.g. Bogaards 2000).[13]

On the basis of the above, mid-range comparisons seem to be particularly viable (at least *prima facie*) also for mixed method research. For the correct estimation of causal effects the prior condition of achieving unit homogeneity (hence comparability of the units observed) is vital. The treatment of concepts at the right level of abstraction ensures exactly this, that heterogeneous units are not counted together, thus producing biased estimated and spurious effects. The analysis of a certain mechanism (e.g. instrumental rationality, or cognitive dissonance etc –see Elster 1989) within a reasonably homogeneous cultural context ensures the comparability of the different cases analysed, hence increased confidence in the findings of comparative case studies and their extension to the larger universe analyzed statistically. Reinforcing the estimate of effects with the analysis of mechanisms and *vice versa* often requires a clear specification of the boundary conditions of our theory. This result can be obtained in principle also in a non-bounded universe, but this is less likely for the reasons specified above.

Mixed methods and mid-range comparisons: advantages and tradeoffs

Nested analysis

As Lieberman makes explicit, nested analysis should be applied after establishing the domain of application of the theory (2005, 438). If the units of analysis are countries (as they typically are in comparative politics) and the phenomenon analyzed allows a universal or at least an inter-area generalization, nested analysis works without further problems than those highlighted by its proponent. In mid-range comparisons involving

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[13] Being unobservable, mechanisms lend themselves to 'theoretical abuse'. As Shapiro eloquently describes, phenomena may be misrepresented in such a way as to show that a certain mechanism (for example instrumental rationality) is determining them, while at the same time ignoring several other rival mechanisms that may be at play to determine the same outcome, and may actually constitute more plausible explanations for it., both from the point of view of the 'lay' external observer and from the point of view of those directly involved in the phenomenon (Shapiro 2005).

countries as units of analysis, those that Sartori typifies as 'intra-area' comparisons[14] (Sartori 1970), however, the number of units is unlikely to reach the number sufficient to support robust statistical analysis for the LNA part of the protocol[15]. Lieberman acknowledges this problem (2005, 438, fn.7), and remarks that there is no exact 'lower bound' for the number of cases that would make statistical modeling viable. It is clear, though, that a number of cases in the region of twenty or thirty would not probably produce robust coefficients, which would therefore put the whole process up to a flawed start.[16]

This does not mean that nested analysis would be unviable in such conditions: quite the contrary. The protocol preserves intact all its potential of flexibility and adaptability to simultaneously broad analysis of key variable across many cases and intensive, thick within-case analysis of high-leverage units. However, its results would probably be more robust if it were to be complemented by some way to increase the number of observations at the LNA level. Depending on the phenomenon object of the analysis, two avenues seem to be open to the researcher: extend the observation over time, analyzing time series data on each of the cross sectional units within the universe; or 'scaling down', multiplying observations at the sub-national level within the countries analyzed. Space does not allow a full discussion of the pros and cons of these options (on which see Capoccia 2006), but a first observation is that data collection is likely to be much more expensive and time-consuming than predicted in the original protocol (Lieberman 2005, 438). Quantitative datasets are not likely to be available as easily on for sub-national observations on the variables of interests, while historical data going back enough time to build meaningful time series are even less likely to be handy. Such datasets will have to be generated by the researcher, with substantial effort and use of resources.[17]

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[14] For cross- country comparisons that are not bounded geographically (involving, for example, all countries over a certain period or presenting certain socioeconomic characteristics etc.) this problem may not be as acute.

[15] For example, excluding the tiniest political entities such as Andorra or Trinidad and Tobago and others of similar size, there are sixteen states in Western Europe; in both Western and Central-Eastern Europe, if one includes all countries till Belarus and Ukraine on the East as well as Malta and Cyprus in the Mediterranean, the number goes up to thirty-eight; Latin America comprises twenty-three countries; even Sub-Saharian Africa with its fifty states, hardly constitutes a large enough sample to achieve statistically significant coefficients.

[16] Lieberman sets the lower boundary at twelve cases, which is bound to be controversial with many quantitative scholars (2005, 438, fn.7)

[17] The two avenues for increasing the number of observations at the LNA levels also entail some methodological problems that are at the centre of the debate between quantitative methodologists: time series cross sectional analysis in which there is not enough variation within the series are likely to

Shapiro and Wendt's 'methodological pragmatism'

If nested analysis may work at its best (including the overall parsimony of the research and the avoidance of a heavy burden for the researcher) for universal or inter-area generalizations, the protocol proposed by Shapiro and Wendt may have the opposite tendency, namely that of working at its best in single (or maximum two-) case studies. Intensive, multi-method research of the kind that Shapiro and Wendt describe, aimed at collecting as much empirical evidence as possible to arrive at a satisfactory description of unobservable causal mechanisms generating a certain phenomenon, is difficult to replicate in a different context. Short of systematic collaboration between different researcher, area-wide (or equivalent in breadth) comparisons would be impossible. The two authors acknowledge this limitation, underlying the costs of repeating this kind of research in different cases. Research efforts such as that by Gaventa (1980) which the authors describe, or Tarrow (1988), another example of the same kind, are not easily replicated in more than one or two cases.[18] The protocol does not say how to achieve

produce spurious results (Western and Jackman 1994), while Green et al. (2001) emphasize the importance of introducing dummy variables in the model to capture the 'fixed effects' (different intercepts) of the cross sectional units analysed. Similarly, if data are collected on both countries and regions, the number of countries (higher-level units) may still be too small to conduct multi-level analysis. On sub-national comparisons, see also Snyder (2001).

[18] The seminal work by Tarrow on Italy (1988) shows how statistical methods (and therefore the estimation of causal effects) can be woven in an essentially qualitative, intensive research protocol. Tarrow starts from the qualitative analysis of a left-wing Catholic 'base community' active in Florence in 1965-1968, and traces the changes in its discourse, activities and self-image in occasion of the explosion of students' and workers' protest in Italy in 1968. After the cycle of protest exploded in the nation, the community in question also became more confrontational and absorbed many of the themes of the national students and workers' protest. In order to reinforce its finding of the influence of the national cycle of protest on the characteristics of the organization that he was studying, Tarrow used quantitative data on the total number of the left-wing religious 'base communities' in Italy, and on violent and non-violent 'protest events' in all Italian cities (derived from newspaper articles) over a certain period before and after 1968. By using regression analysis, Tarrow established a significant correlation between the presence of communities of the same type as the Florentine one on which he carried out his intensive qualitative analysis, and the episodes of protest (and in general collective action) in each Italian city. This reinforced the inference that he drew on the impact of the national protest cycle on the characteristics of the 'base community' which was the object of his first case study (Tarrow 1988; 2004). The coexistence of qualitative and quantitative research in the same study in the example just made is obviously different from 'nested analysis'. First, the LNA is carried out to reinforce the description of the causal mechanisms identified in the case study. There is no guarantee that the same causal mechanisms were at play in the other communities of the sample, but the reference to the same cultural context (Italy) and a short time period (1966-1973) certainly increase the confidence of the researcher that similar mechanisms were at play in all units studied in the LNA. Generalizability within those boundaries is therefore plausible-not so, or not necessarily so, would be the generalization of such a study if it were to be extended beyond Italy, or to, say, a century-long time span.

external validity of the findings, even though in relation to an intra-area context, if the researcher starts from a problem that she identifies in one specific case. To be sure, research of this kind is normally embedded in a theoretical framework that applies more broadly and is potentially extendable to other cases, but the extendibility of the empirical findings to the realm of a mid-range comparison is not covered in the process. Probably the incorporation in the protocol, once identified the problem in one specific case and before delving into intensive field research, of some more superficial analysis of other possible contexts in which the same problem may be present, and similar mechanisms might be at play, would help determine the possible realm of validity of the findings and guide future, intensive studies by other researchers on the same issue (see Geertz 2005).[19]

Research Processes in Political Theory

<u>Normativity, description, and interpretation</u>

A number of prevalent dichotomies appear to govern current understandings of political theory. It is however desirable to identify areas where a mixture of approaches would be beneficial, and to point out where such combinations are already happening, often under the noses of theorists. The notion of 'problem-driven research' (and the connected notion of 'methodological pragmatism') prevalent in quantitative and qualitative political science can only be loosely translated to the macro sphere of methods and epistemologies exhibited in political theory, not the least because methodological (as distinct from analytical) precision is not one of the hallmarks of the latter, and there is little use of methodological templates. Furthermore, all political theory is problem-driven in a sense, be the problem one of determining ethical policies, of understanding and applying the arguments of a theorist in a new light, of assessing rival interpretations of texts and utterances that will ultimately affect political action, or of discovering and decoding ranges of meaning attached to a concept or a cluster of concepts.

In assessing the merits and shortcoming of the various methods and epistemologies that are brought to bear on substantive problems, the most enduring distinction finds 'normative' political theory opposed to 'empirical' approaches. For many political theorists, their vocation—as Weber already asserted—involves intervention in the world

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[19] The explanatory standards posed by Shapiro and Wendt's protocol are explicitly lower than the 'elimination of rival explanations' posited by nested analysis. Conscious of the limitation of the kind of research they describe, they talk about constructing 'persuasive' arguments.

(Weber, 1958). Normative approaches usually attempt to impose value structures that emanate from the dictates of reason, or that appeal to general human ethical intuitions. The world from that standpoint is flawed, though improvable, and the remedies proffered are intended to hold irrespective of time and space. As against that stands the empirical study of politics (which of course generates its own theory but is now detached from what is termed in this paper political theory and located instead within comparative government—to some extent due to the institutional sub-divisions that partition political science departments) that emphasizes descriptive analysis based on empirical evidence.

The division of the field should however be tripartite, not bipartite. Bridging the gap between the two are interpretivists, who reject both the possibility of universal and permanent solutions and the possibility of impartial description, while subscribing to epistemological features entertained both by normativists and by empiricists. Interpretivists do recognize the existence of facts in politics. They also recognize the further crucial fact that political thinking exists as a researchable entity which itself displays certain features and patterns—equivalent to Durkheim's 'social facts' (Durkheim, 1964)—but they insist that all such facts are located in loose webs of significance that confer on them multiple meanings. Those webs reflect the conceptual and ideological apparatuses through which such facts are processed by observers of political phenomena and consumers of political thinking. From that perspective, prescription and normativity are themselves major empirically-determinable features of political thinking. Most interpretivists agree, however, that the practice of normativity is necessary to advance and improve the quality of political life. Moreover, they not only demonstrate that normative political theory is itself permeated with prior epistemological and ideological choices, but in some cases insist that the art of decoding and demystifying is a preliminary to making good ethical choices. Norms themselves derive from already existing practices which have to be identified and understood in order for the norm to be workable and persuasive; indeed, to use the norm as a practice-modifier (Bourdieu, 1990). In addition, normative political theory already exhibits the conceptual and morphological characteristics we find in any instance of political thinking.

The conclusion is that normativity may be better defended and preserved if it acknowledges that it does not deal with ethical universals, not even with best practice. The usefulness, efficiency and relevance of normative prescription would be considerably enhanced were it to be combined with an understanding of the nature, and the limitations, of its subject-matter—political thinking itself. Normative theorists need to

know what can and cannot be done with political theory, political philosophy and political thought (however we name these practices and disciplines); if the responsibility to obtain such knowledge weighs more on normative theorists it is because of their relative disengagement from methodological reflections. That said, interpretavists need to acknowledge that the drive to recommendation and to improvement is, and always has been, a central—though not sole—feature of political thinking, irrespective of whether the proffered solutions are realizable or even desirable. Hence prescription may be normative, in the sense of the endeavor to construct universal rules of desirable conduct, but it may more modestly refers simply to recommending preferred positions, values and policies. The duty of the interpretavist, among others, is to advance the transparency of epistemological frameworks and conceptual structures in order to assist the task of political philosophers.

Inescapably, all forms of thinking about politics operate within a dual set of constraints—semantic and structural. If there are universals in political theory, they are of those kinds. The semantic constraints on political theory relate to the ineliminable semantic properties of political concepts: ambiguity, indeterminacy, inconclusiveness, and vagueness (Freeden, 2005). The structural constraints on political theory relate to the ineliminable morphological properties of political discourse: essential contestability, decontestation, and fluid configurations, both temporally and spatially (Freeden, 1996, chapter 2). Behind that lies the question whether the political theorist is an 'explainer' or a 'prescriber' and, as we shall question below, whether explanation relates to causality or to what may be called flexible mapping.

Precision and imprecision

One further dichotomy in political theory requires more detailed exploration: that between precision and imprecision in conceptualization. Interestingly, an overlap exists among some political scientists and political philosophers regarding the importance and feasibility of conceptual precision. Among empirical political scientists there has been a movement towards 'precising' the definition of democracy through identifying its minimum kit. Likewise, among philosophers a central strain of investigation has been to offer definitions—say, of justice—that will serve as a stable resting point for all theories attached to particular conceptual and value problems. There are two reasons why those can become exercises in failure. First, because not every theorist of democracy or of justice may accept these definitions as binding, due to their location in different semantic

areas of competing ideologies; second, because complex definitions, as with any form of language, cannot be held constant either synchronically or diachronically. Even 'democratic minimalists' accept that beyond the minimum a variety of features will present themselves (those political philosophers who often eschew the knowledge gained from the 'real world' are less prone to qualify their own approaches on the basis of evidence, when evidence can simply be interpreted as bad practice—and bad thinking prior to that). Beyond that, the problem of boundaries emerges as a significant obstacle. 'Precisers' often construct specific thresholds where only vagueness and inconclusiveness reign. Vagueness relates to the boundary problems between neighbouring phenomena, such as liberalism and libertarianism. Inconclusiveness relates to the barriers that stand in the way of working out the small print details of general rules or attributions, when general rules lack the finesse—as they necessarily have to—to relate to the particular circumstances of individual cases. Some analytical political philosophers fare no better in that realm. They may discover not only that, on the dimension of language, polysemy is inevitable due to the multiple readings of any text, but that, on the dimension of observing politics, precision is often the kiss of death in political practice. And yet, the urge to prescribe clear-cut ethical rules on the basis of careful enquiry is frequently irresistible both philosophically and politically.

The problem, obviously, is to find an epistemology that can mediate between the fluidity of meaning and the need—a basic requirement of political decision-making—to hold it constant. In terms of the trade, the challenge is to find a point between the essential contestability of concepts and the need for decontestation. One indication is that most parties to the various methodologies already share a commitment to pluralism. For 'democratic precisers' the commitment is to a value pluralism embedded in the values and machinery of democracy itself. For political philosophers, it is a subscription to reflective and autonomous choice that offers openness and difference. True, the methodological practices of the discrete groups of scholars do not always deliver the results expected from that background epistemology: Precisers may include in a democratic definition those regimes that do not embrace pluralism at all. A minimum definition may not include the liberal values that are generally 'smuggled in' under the rubric of Western democracy. More to the point, Sartori's concerns about the vagueness of conceptual stretching have caused him to fall back on the following: 'We do need, ultimately, 'universal' categories—concepts which are applicable to any time and place.' (Sartori, 1970: 1035). Hence his reference to conceptual misformation, which implies the

highly controversial possibility of a correct formation, whereas the imposition of definitions can exclude as much as it includes (Collier and Levitsky, 1997: 445).[20] A similar commitment to an original version of a concept, from which deviations occur, may even be found in Gallie's path-breaking work on essential contested concepts, although that work has more recently led to different methodological conclusions (Gallie, 1955-6; Freeden, 1996: 47-95).[21] Correspondingly, Rawls argued that if we feel coerced by the arguments of political philosophy, 'it may be because, when we reflect on the matter at hand, values, principles, and standards are so formulated and arranged that they are freely recognized as ones we do, or should, accept' (Rawls, 1993: 45. Italics added). The epistemology of choice apparently stretches only that far and reason converges on a point where it leaves one with no option. But are the 'formulations' and 'arrangements' of values and concepts—that is to say, their morphology and mutual weighting—so unambiguous, so determinate, that such singularity is inescapably compelling? The certainty evinced by some rational choice theorists is intriguingly paralleled here by what may be termed 'ethical choice' theorists.

Contextualists, on the other hand, claim to address these problems by recognizing the variety of cultural and ideational environments in which political language is located. They, however, fall into another trap: the impossibility of reconstructing context in its totality or, more accurately, of determining which components of a context are significant and which more trivial; that is to say, how should each contextual component be weighted against the others? Thus, at a methodological level, we have a plurality of 'competing' contexts. The main question in this sphere is whether contexts act as disambiguating factors and, if so, to what extent is that disambiguation satisfactory. Does, for example, Berlin's distinction between positive and negative liberty (Berlin, 1969) work because it was construed against the backdrop of the Cold War, or because it evoked traditional English understandings of liberty, or because it was assimilated by the scholarly community eager to establish the general properties of liberty? Did the Idealists, libertarians and liberal welfare state advocates who used the same distinction at the end of the 19th century choose separate contexts for 'positive' liberty when they arrived concurrently at completely different institutional solutions for the same problems? A

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[20] Note also the following observation: 'in a literature in which conceptual confusion is a recurring problem, the analytic gains from precising the definition must be weighted against the cost of unsettling the semantic field' (Collier and Levitsky, 1997: 445).

[21] See also Collier, Hidalfo and Maciuceanu, 2006, who attempt to rescue some form of an original version from oblivion.

second question is whether the context-dependency of concepts is a prescription for their ephemerality or whether more durable properties of concepts in general, as well as a given concept, can emerge from 'contextuality'. Does liberty always invoke individuality, or only in certain cultures?

The morphological approach draws some of these concerns together. In the analysis of ideology, it entails commitment to another kind of pluralism: an awareness of the ranges of conceptual configurations available in and among ideologies. The morphological approach mixes <u>polysemic pluralism</u> with the fluctuating 'finality' that politics invariably seems to seek through its language of sovereignty, authority and legitimacy. Relying heavily not on the intentions of the writers and speakers of texts but on the consumption and interpretation of texts, it regards thinking about politics as a give-and-take between the inherent indeterminacy of conceptual meaning, the robust ineliminable components and grammar of concepts that are necessary but insufficient for a definition to take shape,22 and the actual particular decontestation and definition that takes place in political language in order to make political concepts manageable and applicable to the world of action and practices. Thus, a durable (though arguably not permanent) framework of outline conceptual meaning is continuously punctuated by time and space related decontestations that create an illusory, if politically crucial, picture of full conceptual stability. Because decontestation may easily involve normative prescription, it is a practice engaged in at all levels of thinking about politics, philosophical and ideological. That is one way of bridging the gap between normativity and the mere expression of preferences in political thinking. Because it relates to empirically determinable linguistic practices and their relation to political facts in the field, it brings together the concerns of political theorists and empirical political comparativists. Because a focus on decontestation acknowledges the semantic pluralism of political language (even if the decontesters themselves do not), it maintains an allegiance to the semi-conscious liberal epistemology subscribed to by philosophers and empiricist scholars, in which choice and diversity are cherished values, while concurrently change-cum-development permits the reflective modification of values and the concepts that contain them.

There is another way of formulating some of these issues, with a view to identifying mixed methods that may be beneficial to political theorists. The analysis of political

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22 On which see MacCallum's well-known analysis of the concept of liberty (MacCallum, 1972).

theory is suspended between the producers (=theorists and articulators) and consumers (=interpreters and recipients) of political thought. In particular, the current philosophical emphasis on agency and autonomy, and the historical emphasis on intentionality, pull towards the first category. The malleable processing of political ideas over time and space pulls towards the second category. In between the two the product itself (=theories and discourses) is subjected variably to the attention of both categories. For the first category the product is an instance of normative acumen and creativity with regard to political arguments, explanations or visions. For the second category it is an instance of the textual or oral complexity and mutability of patterns of political thinking. In parallel, another distinction operates between the individual and the group, both as producers and consumers of political thought. But none of those approaches rules the other out, once certain precautions have been adopted. That is so because politics is ultimately to do with the relationships between decision-makers and those to whom decisions are applied. As political philosophers we appreciate that the invention and refinement of ideas that further common conceptions of the political good is one of the most important practices of civilized societies. As social scientists we should appreciate that the reception of ideas—their translation, vulgarization, misinterpretations—provides the central insights into the role of political ideas and provides the basis for a comparative political theory. As students of political thought we need to engage with the complete cycle of its creation, dissemination, and effective absorption in a society.

In sum, the challenge to political theorists is to develop a robust approach to comparative political theory in a manner that will also connect with some major concerns of political science. Faced with the universalism of political ethicists, political theory nevertheless has to respond to the challenge of useful generalization in order to identify meaningful differences. Faced with the uniqueness of single (contextual) case studies, it nevertheless has to respond to the challenge of particularism in order to identify underlying patterns of political thinking. And faced with individual agency as well as with group conduct, it has to explore the points of contact between the two.

The units of analysis in political theory

The very recourse to a comparative approach in political theory involves a key feature familiar to political scientists. Its more conscious application to political theory can serve as a further framework in minimizing the epistemic gap noted above. For useful comparisons to take place, the unit of analysis needs to be identified. Political theorists

are aware of the different forms of their subject-matter in general terms, but they are yet to make a serious effort to distinguish between the different units of analysis at their disposal in terms of the work that can, and cannot, be done with each. The main units are (1) the exceptional theorist or philosopher who writes an 'authored' text; (2) the argument, theme or ideology, say the analysis and realization of equality; or fascism (3) the 'authorless' text as a time-independent book or script subject to different readings, say Plato's Republic or the American Declaration of Independence; (4) the concept—the raw building block of political thought.

Can meaningful comparison be achieved in each case?

(1) The study of individual theorists is rarely comparative. When it is, it may refer to a coterie of such people in a common enterprise, such as the Philosophic Radicals (Hamburger, 1963). Otherwise it may occur at some considerable level of abstraction, often not contextualized but employed in order to model different approaches in the abstract, say, Marx versus Mill (Duncan, 1973). However, the widespread practice of extrapolating truths from the writings of a given theorist is characteristic of some students of political philosophy. It constitutes either an instrumental use of a theorist, or an appeal to the authority of theorist as a starting point for exploring philosophical issues. That practice overlaps with:

(2) The exploration of themes aiming to transcend comparison through generalization. In the scholarly investigation of a political or ethical problem, multiple texts—books and articles—may be used in order to construct a normative argument and in order to validate it. Again, an appeal to the authority of established scholarship (or a challenge to such authority) is a necessary act of comparison, through which the analyst locates her or his own work. However, the stipulation of an ideological belief system by a political theorist—usually itself a strongly held normative position— is usually non-comparative. Because ideologies compete over the control of political language, references to other ideologies are mainly on a derogatory level. Only the analysis of ideologies carries with it a genuine comparative perspective, though if they are treated en bloc, at an unhelpfully high level of generalization.

(3) When the unit of analysis is the 'authorless' text, research may typically involve the semantic decoding of a discourse as reception-dependent—the latter typical of conceptual historians in the *Begriffsgeschichte* school (Koselleck, 2002)—and as group mediated. Here comparison and generalization are of a different nature: they rely mainly

on identifying shared patterns of language and of understanding, on singling out both the unique and the overlapping in diverse cultural and ideological contexts.

(4) When the unit of analysis is the concept, it is of sufficiently microscopic scale to enable a study of its combinations and mutations in multiple arrangements. In this case, questions concerning the distribution of significance among a cluster of concepts, or their relative weighting, or the durability versus ephemerality of their concrete conceptualizations, offer templates of flexible interpretative mapping. In particular, they enable a morphological comparative analysis of political theories and political ideologies.

The first two units of analysis are normally employed as a basis from which to make normative prescriptions, so that ultimately a political theory emerges in which 'one size fits all',23 though in the hands of historians the reconstruction of intentions, or of contexts, has played a major role with unit (1). The last two units of analysis are context-sensitive. Unit (3) focuses on the consumption of political ideas. This empirical perspective permits the identification of the differential semantic contents, and the differential impact, of central terms and arguments, in terms of available cultural and historical understandings. Unit (4) offers another empirical comparison and aims at establishing patterns of political thinking as constraints on, and enablers of, political action, but also as explorations of the richness and diverse textures of political thinking itself. Here framework commonalities, rather than identities, may be ascertained, but also—and crucially—how different meanings are formed through the polysemy of concepts and their fluid reconfigurations.

The choice of epistemology and method relevant to a research problem may be enriched through realizing that many insights attached to the different units of analysis are attained through combining complementary and mutually interdependent methods. Thus, the contextual approach of reception theory provides an additional component of knowledge when the constraints operating on conceptual meaning are explored. The interplay between individual thinker and available vocabulary is another kind of complementarity. And the construction of norms may benefit from an appreciation of the compossible and impossible meanings that various concepts can bear. Locating political theory within the domain of political science gains considerably from moving away from the focus of unit (1) on the abnormal in political thinking—that is to say, superior forms of argument and reflective ethical standpoints that are contrasted with the pathological, the inadequate and

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23 Even when theorists are aware of the cultural peculiarities of their position, it is often no deterrent to working out an 'exportable' version that can gain global assent at some basic level, as in Rawls (1999).

the incorrect. Good political thinking is not the only, or even the main, feature of political thought in a given society, just as good laws are not the only kind emerging from legislatures. Concentrating on the normal products of political thinking, employing units (3) and (4), enables the complex practices of thinking about politics to be taken more seriously by their investigators. In sum, acquaintance with the fundamental empirical properties of political language is a vital resource in articulating good and efficacious political theory. Normative theory needs to know the features of the material with which it works; while the study of the properties of political thinking will benefit from the thought-experiments conducted by political philosophers that explore the limits of the tolerance of meaning that political concepts can bear.

<u>Negotiation as a potential site of methodological pragmatism</u>

An illustration of methodological pragmatism in political theory may be found in examining the epistemological and conceptual features of negotiation, in which units of analysis (2), (3) and (4) above may be seen to interact. But a small caveat is desirable at this point. If methodological pragmatism implies both a free and a contingent choice among methods, some kinds of political theory, as argued above, invite a tighter and more interlocked relationship among methodologies, even if that is not always the practice. In particular, a morphological approach that analyses political theories in terms of their complex patterns of meaning is already predicated on the contextualism that conceptual history methodology requires, as well as on the identification of broad themes or families of argument. It will be informed by the self-perception of existing ideological families, but unlike the practice of first order ideologists, it introduces a comparative perspective on a research level in order to shed light on the various ways different arrangements of the same conceptual components produce diverse ideologies.

The epistemology of negotiation once again implies a world of plural meanings, in which two or more perspectives obtain on a particular issue; the morphology of concepts adds to that the possibility of semantic overlap in negotiation. Bereft of those two underlying features of political language, negotiation would be impossible and agreement from different starting points would have to be achieved by linguistic and physical fiat. What are the initial differences open to the potential employment of different methods of analysis here? First, that between those who see negotiation as itself a value and those who regard it as a technique serving other values. Crucially, each side of that distinction is itself nested in more than one theoretical framework (Cohen, 1998). Hence the choice

of navigation through the challenges thrown up by negotiation interfaces with a number of epistemologies and methodologies. Negotiation as a value relates to unit of analysis (2) which refers both to ethical normativity and to a range of ideological positions. As a normative value negotiation is rooted in the reading of compromise as a virtue, as a feature of altruism or of fairness. Hence it is anchored concurrently in an ethics of reasoning based on respect for the other side (Richardson, 2003), and in that area within liberal ideologies that concerns reasonableness and toleration. In both cases it is predicated on the desire 'to create shared meanings and understandings where contradictory readings existed before', and it aims at putting forward 'an offer roughly equidistant between the previous positions of the negotiating parties' (Cohen, 1999: 3, 5). The analysis of negotiation in either case may initially differ. As a feature of normative ethics negotiation can be elevated to a universal rule of conduct based on rational argumentation. As a feature of a particular ideological family, it will be posited as a self-evident viewpoint, morally superior to other competing ideological stances, and legitimately buttressed by emotional commitment as well as rational argument. There is every reason to assume that both features operate simultaneously, thus offering complementary readings to the negotiating discourse.

Negotiation as a technique is rooted within a strategy of bargaining and rational choice, in which the maximum advantage possible over the other negotiating parties consistent with arriving at an agreement is sought—the 'intersection of the maximin strategies of all players' (Scharpf, 1997: 119). It consequently has no notion of either mutual recognition or equidistance. Those strategies may be nested in realpolitik ideological positions—types of non-liberal nationalism come to mind—that legitimate the pursuit of group self-interest, often at whatever possible cost can be inflicted on the other parties. Adopting that viewpoint involves important reconceptualizations of negotiation away from notions of fairness.

A second important difference regarding negotiation is between those who wish to protect the substantive values under scrutiny in the negotiation process **before** _and_ after negotiation, and those who are prepared to attain stability or conflict resolution at high, if not unsustainable, substantive cost to those substantive values. These involve once again varying epistemological and ideological viewpoints. Fine-tuning the distinction encapsulated in this second difference will reveal under which circumstances to think in terms of compromise and under which in terms of strategic reformulation. Compromise is a success from the 'be flexible' epistemological perspective (knowledge and values are

pliable within reasonable limits), and a failure from the 'stick to your principles' epistemological perspective (knowledge and values are immutable). The one derives from liberal pluralism; the other may derive either from non-plural epistemologies, usually found among radical ideologies, or from liberal universalism. The 'stick to your principles' perspective resonates with the notion of minimum thresholds or conditions that cannot be breached and with conceptual obduracy. In its extreme case a zero-sum relationship between competing values will prohibit negotiation altogether, but in any case the thrust of that position is protective. Hence the discursive framework will vary. The 'be flexible' framework investigates possible semantic overlap with different conceptual arrangements of the other parties, in an effort to determine the point at which such overlap is sufficient to claim 'consensus'. It implies a framework of structural tolerance pertaining to the architecture of concepts and values, while the 'stick to your principles' framework inhibits the tolerance level of its principled values. At best, it determines the degree of conceptual fluidity that can be engaged in before a range of acceptable meanings is breached and before other concepts adjacent to its core values are seriously damaged. Adherence to the typical normativity of unit of analysis (2) renders the 'be flexible' approach suspect, if not invisible; adherence to the typical contextual malleability of units (3) or (4) renders the 'stick to your principles' approach misguided and unworkable. The choice of method will determine whether a particular negotiating exchange is deemed to have been successful or to have failed, but it may also tease out different layers of meaning in a given negotiating discourse, the ideologies within which they are nested, and what takes place when shifts occur.

The semantic decoding of a discourse as reception-dependent (unit of analysis (3))— offers yet another dimension to investigating the language of negotiation. At one level, the patterns of negotiating language that can be gleaned on the basis of the comparative study of texts can offer insights concerning relationship between such discourses and the cultural constraints operating on them in different contexts; that is to say, how and why different discourses of negotiation emerge (Sebenius, 2002). In parallel, reception theory allows us to factor in the readings and misunderstandings of the negotiating position consequent to the polysemic character of political language (Del Collins, 2005). In particular, the discursive identification of the imprecision of language is put to beneficial use when vagueness of textual formulations smoothens the path of negotiation, while the precision aspired to by some political theorists proves here to be counterproductive.

Transcending the above distinctions is a deeper difference, often elided in scholarly work, between two categories of multiple values in a society. The one is value-pluralism, which may be sub-divided into value co-existence, enabled through semantic overlap (the epitome of liberal pluralism), and semantic separation, enabled through values in separate spheres (more typical of fragmented societies and their ideologies, where specified value areas do not overlap, or are relegated to social sites (e.g. the private versus the public, or the religious versus the secular, or one geo-cultural area versus another as in Belgium) where they are made not to impinge on each other or to do so minimally. The other is value-conflict, in which values compete in a zero-sum game. Crucially, only the latter category, not all forms of value-pluralism,24 harbours value incompatibility (sometimes known as incommensurability). Those differences are clarified through employing unit of analysis (4), focusing on conceptual structure, which serves to understand the location of values in relation to others and the spatial architecture and interaction amongst values. The morphology of concepts suggests that concepts have more components than can be used in any instance of a concept (part of the essential contestability thesis) and that weighting and diverse configurations of the components of political concepts is therefore inevitable. This runs contrary to an assertion such as 'fundamental values are plural, conflicting, incommensurable in theory and uncombinable in practice.'25 That assertion becomes merely a special case of the more general features of value pluralism. Switching to the concept as a unit of analysis does not eliminate the 'discourse' or the 'normative argument' as other units of analysis, but adds another dimension of investigation, illustrating the constraints and options open to a negotiator once familiarity with conceptual intension and structure is superimposed on the classic aims and modes of negotiation.

From the vantage point of political theory, a combination of the different 'pluralist' approaches is possible when more than one unit of analysis is combined. For political philosophers, deeply held political values can be better protected (a) through acquaintance with their potential and intension and (b) through appreciating the maximin logic of negotiation. To begin with, the standard concerns of political philosophy through the construction of ethical arguments need to be enlisted in order to identify and distribute significance to values, even if initially to bestow on them the tag of non-negotiability for normative reasons (hence making them potentially incommensurate in a

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24 As Crowther initially argues (Crowther, 2002: 2) while modifying the claim on p. 3.
25 W. A Galston (2002: 30), summarizing Berlin's position approvingly.

zero-sum game). Clearly liberty and individuality can be normatively presented as non-negotiable liberal values per se. But 'per se' is a meaningless epithet that overlooks not only context, but conceptual morphology and the variety of components that shape a concept and permit its variable conceptions. Liberal theorists should be aware that whenever they construct an argument or disseminate an ideology they are making an additional move that ranks and prioritizes some values. While much strategic negotiation is predicated on the withholding of information concerning possible points of convergence among the sides, political theorists need also to be equipped with another set of information: an appreciation of the 'behaviour' of concepts that permits overlap, separation, or ensures conflict.

At this point, the fluidity of conceptual morphology demonstrates the normality of polysemy and the constraints that normative theorists need to take on board. The structure of key political concepts operates both to hold their ineliminable components constant by ensuring their generality and vagueness, and to decontest them by selecting temporary and contingent conceptions of the concept for concrete, contextualized usage. The core ineliminability appears on the surface to correspond to incommensurability between different concepts. On closer observation it does not, due to the high level of generality, even vacuity, that master political concepts possess. The contingency appears to correspond to a value-pluralism that embraces the relativist position that no value has more weight than the others. On closer observation it does not. Some values become weightier, as decontestation always involves expressing preferences for some values, or some conceptual configurations, over others. That said, the unavoidability of conceptual indeterminacy—despite its being masked by decontestation—does not entail moral indeterminacy, as ethical frameworks and cultural environments will always privilege some decontestations over others.

Privileging, however, is not tantamount to universalizing. The 'precising' that is a feature of decontestation is merely a temporary stopping point that creates fleeting meaning, without which both normative argumentation and political decision-making are random, but it is deceptive to assume that permanent meaning can thereby be guaranteed. The structural properties of conceptual arrangements, as well as the temporal and spatial contexts of meaning, render such permanence unattainable, though they may well replace fleetingness with greater durability.

Instead of conceiving of a value as precise or determinate, its protection is better ensured by permitting it to be decontested within a field of meaning acceptable to its proponents (ascertainable through reception-theory, using unit of analysis (3)). The real test of negotiation is then not so much mutual acceptability as finding the first point at the periphery of one's semantic zone of comfort where one can stop and still defend the core value system at stake. Agreement is conditioned on that probing of conceptual intension rather than on an exercise in empathy. Knowledge of such semantic structures will greatly assist in protecting a moral standpoint. For example, it may demonstrate that an ostensibly slippery slope argument can be countered by referring to the robustness of certain conceptual combinations that will serve to avoid undesirable mutation.

What, then, are the conceptual and linguistic constraints and combinations that pre-enable negotiation? (1) A switch from two original concepts, A and B, that cannot even create a Venn diagram relationship, to a third concept, C, that would be sufficiently equivalent—in Laclau's terms (Laclau, 1996)—to be acceptable to both original concept users (In the recent negotiations over the current Lebanese crisis the move from suspension of hostilities [A] and ceasefire [B] to cessation of hostilities [C]). (2) A second is the shift to a different conception of concept A that is in a Venn diagram relationship with a particular conception of concept B (liberty [A] as self-development and progress [B] as individual improvement). (3) A third is a different adjacency in the configuration surrounding concept A and concept B, where vagueness can play a sufficient role in blurring the distinctions between the two original concepts (state intervention adjacent to paternalism, and state regulation adjacent to enabling). Of course, negotiation may be thwarted through holding down a meaning of concept A by fiat of informed opinion, and creating such high costs of sticking to concept B that a linguistic shift becomes advisable (instances of political correctness, such as the move from race to ethnicity).

Political theorists equipped with a comprehension of the features of political language will develop different reactions to the semantic consequences of negotiation. Conceptual differences may be elided, as when the compound concept liberal democracy, originating in two previously often mutually exclusive concepts, creates real identity among the sub-meanings of a concept. It is then up to normative theorists—embracing the ethical macro-argument, but not detailing the conceptual micro-architecture of such an argument—to justify such adjacencies and overlaps or to rule them out. Sometimes conceptual differences may be discounted, as when differences exist but are deemed unimportant, or are given reduced weighting. Thus the dying distinction between

freedom and liberty may still be of interest to historians of ideas while ignored by analytical philosophers. Conceptual differences may be misinterpreted, as when they still exist but the master concept is used to conceal them, deliberately or unintentionally (the debate over federalism in the European Union is an example). Political theorists may realize that imprecision is not only unavoidable but may play an important political role, or they may insist on distinguishing between correct and incorrect usages. Methodological pragmatism is on hand in these cases.

In terms of political theory, negotiation hinges on the political feasibility, not just the logical possibilities, of certain configurations of concepts. However, for political theory another important question is: which configuration is the most robust? Robustness lends the durability without which a political idea cannot develop, carry conviction and maintain impact. It is a feature that ideologists seek—a more modest form of locking-in meaning, namely, controlling and marshalling the parameters of the conceptual configuration as far as is feasible. But it is also a feature sought by ethicists, for whom just solutions are by their very timeless nature supposed to be permanent. So the distinction here is between the <u>extension</u> of the time dimension for reasons of following what is efficacious, and the <u>elimination</u> of the time dimension for reasons of following what is right. Two dissimilar epistemological vocabularies relating to the same issue may concurrently discharge those functions, when directed at different consumers.

<u>Political theory and scientific realism</u>

Finally, a few thoughts on the scientific status of the study of political thought. Ian Shapiro has recently called for a return to 'scientific realism' in investigating politics. Can we extend that to the investigation of political theory? In considering the mixture of methods we return here to the challenge of narrowing the gap between political theory and political science; specifically asking whether some of the features of <u>studying</u> political theory—as distinct from producing it—cannot be termed scientific. Shapiro's view of scientific realism centres on causality (Shapiro, 2005: 8-9). Of course, causality plays a part in monographs of political thought, investigating the historical, social or intellectual contexts of a thinker or of a debate. It has, however, also been misused to construct artificial historical sequences of the development of certain ideologies, or ideas such as 'democracy' through the ages, though that is increasingly going out of fashion due to the critiques of 'contextualist' and 'intentionalist' historians of political ideas. Yet a discussion

of causality in political theory may be more usefully replaced by an examination of the constraints that propel political thinking on certain paths rather than others.

My argument here is twofold: first, most treatments of political theory, including Shapiro's, lack the distinction between first and second order political theory—between thinking substantively about the human political condition, and theorizing about such political thinking. Indeed, the elision of that distinction has made the different units of analysis in political theory, referred to above, almost invisible. Second, in second order theorizing about first order political theory (including ideology) there are further features than those identified by Shapiro that confer on it the status of 'scientific'; particularly if we accept the broader meaning of 'wissenschaftlich', unavailable in English but denoting a recognizable body of knowledge. A scientific approach to political theory would clearly not be satisfied merely through causality, let alone prediction. Beyond asking 'what has caused this?' or 'what will happen?', a scientific approach can ask 'what does this do?' (as in functionalist perspectives), or 'what are the significant/typical features of this?'. The latter questions relate explanation to the Weberian goal of Verstehen, though without the psychological empathy that he believed came with it (Weber, 1949: 40-41). They are fundamentally empirical and based on observations of the world, yet they acknowledge that responses to all four questions are interpretivist and supported by a method in which selectivity and diverse qualitative weightings of evidence are endemic. It is rather surprising to find Shapiro insisting that interpretivist theory is a flight from reality because it is a flight from causality (Shapiro, 2005: 9). Perhaps what is at stake here is an interpretation of the word 'reality'! From that perspective, first order political thinking too is a feature of the real world requiring careful analysis. And with regard to political thinking as something that happens in the real social and political world, the emphasis is not on causality but on uncovering its structures, complexities and indeterminacies; that is, on analyzing its properties. Interpretation is a crucial contribution to 'wissenschaftliche' understanding here, through its attempts to organize perceived complexities into a meaningful arrangement that, in parallel with scientific theorems, awaits contrary interpretation. While Shapiro rightly complains about the rift between normative and empirical political theory, he sees political theorists them as 'roving ombudsmen for the truth', scrutinizing political science— rather than their own normative projects—for alternative assumptions and interpretations (Shapiro, 2005: 179-180). In so doing, Shapiro ignores the status of the interpretation of ideas as second order political theory, not necessarily concerned with the truth of the message but with

the many truths of Verstehen. Narrowing the gap between political theory and political science may hence depend on another usage of the term 'science'.

Shapiro rightly criticizes some interpretivists for reducing reality to intentionality. But he then wrongly associates intentionality with interpretivism in general (Shapiro, 2005: 33), whereas most sophisticated interpretations lay as much emphasis on the unintentional and the unobservable as on the intentional—equally potent tools of scientific realism (see e.g. Ricouer, 1956). Interpretivism is not only the recovery of the significance of action for the performing agents. A complementary approach evokes the distribution of significance as itself a resource open to external, scholarly assessment, and can illuminate the manner in which patterns of thought reveal the options open to actors.

In other words, in the study of political thought one can be empiricist without solely being scientific in the sense of causality, prediction, precision, observability and measurement. That alternative empiricism is based on an epistemology according to which the empirical world is indeterminate and inconclusive—that itself is seen as an empirical statement—and interpretation and flexible mapping rather than measurement are the key to translating that empirical reality into conceptual terms. Empiricists need not be sceptical about unobservables (Shapiro, 2005: 29). We may still be looking for best fit, but a best interpretative fit. That too is a kind of qualitative modelling, but based on making sense of 'real-world' facts, not on representing or reproducing them. And it may lead us to substitute strong notions of truth in analyzing political thought with the alternative notion of provisional plausibility. Explanatory value is frequently contingent, even though some of its findings may be more durable than others.

Once we incorporate within political theory an introspective examination of the nature of political thinking itself, there is no reason why Weber's intervention in the world should be the main concern of political theorists (Shapiro, 2005: 49) just as it is not the main concern of anthropologists. Another, no less vital, aim of political theory should be to supply knowledge of the raw material of political thinking and its features, without which intelligent or purposive intervention becomes far less relevant or efficient. Political thought and its study are thus placed in a complex cyclical sequence of ideology → epistemology → interpretation and understanding → recommendation (normative or prescriptive) → ideology, with their variable epistemological underpinnings. All these will work better when combined in an interdependent sequence than when separate, but at any rate understanding of sorts must precede normative or prescriptive recommendation,

and it is the understanding of the features of political theory that is currently its least developed area.

Conclusion

The paper has discussed some tradeoffs and potentialities of combining different methods of analysis in comparative politics and political theory. Combining methods obviously means quite different things in either field. Yet, in both cases the more or less creative combination of methods of analysis is particularly beneficial, for at least two reasons: first, it avoids method-driven research, which identifies the problem to study not in relation to its theoretical or real-world relevance, rather of its amenability to being analyzed with the help of specific methods. Second, and consequentially, combining methods often allows the researcher to frame the problem of analysis in a broader fashion, considering its different facets, hence tackle more complex topics in her analysis. Combining methods has also its pitfalls and tradeoffs, which may play out at the ontological, epistemological and methodological level-these will constitute areas of further reflection for the researchers engaged in the practice of multi-method research, which is likely to become increasingly common in the coming years.

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