

## ***Decentering Comparative Analysis in a Globalizing World***

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Our edited book "*Decentering Comparative Analysis in a Globalizing World*" endeavours to update our conceptions and uses of comparative methodologies through a threefold displacement of traditional views and practices in the human and social sciences.

- First, we aim to question the Western prevailing view over the comparative method. Developed in the human and social sciences mostly from European cultural perspectives and by Northern academic institutions, the comparative method tended to follow the rules of axiological neutrality. However, this methodology has been the outcome of specific ways of relating contexts and normative systems as well. In our view, these relations have not been sufficiently questioned thus far. The commensurability of cultural systems or of countries is not a given and needs to be carefully elaborated. Some approaches in the domain of *post-colonial studies* have developed a rather deconstructive view over the methods of the social sciences as they have been developed in the Western context. We rather stand close to positions aiming at "provincializing Europe", i.e. relativizing or at least relating the comparative categories developed in the context of the Western social sciences to other cultures or areas of the world (Chakrabarty, 2007). We see globalized (Appadurai 2001), multi-situated (Marcus, 1995) or, in some cases bilaterally grounded critiques (Geertz, 1968; Bertrand, 2012) of existing comparative categories, as an opportunity to increase their explanatory and interpretative power.

The eurocentrism of the social sciences is of course not a novelty. However, the great progress of information and communication technologies has tremendously increased our access to knowledge from the most diverse parts of the world. This allows us to broaden our informational basis and to learn from other traditions, conceptions or practices of comparative analysis. To acknowledge and benefit from this decisive up-scaling of the relevant corpus of thinking and practicing the comparative method is the first aim of our book.

- Our second aim deals with disciplinary contexts and boundaries of research objects for comparison. The various academic disciplines of the human and social sciences have developed from specific bodies of knowledge and stabilized methods of knowledge acquisition. The comparative method plays a key role in this context. Many research objects have been appropriated by specific disciplines and often have gotten encapsulated into specific corpora of knowledge. Our book encourages the authors to cross-disciplinary boundaries and especially to go beyond the disciplinary-bounded comparative traditions and methods.

To that end, we invite contributions on research objects that have been intensively seized by different disciplines in the most various cultural contexts.

*Labour* is the first research object we propose to work upon. Historians, economists, sociologists, psychologists, jurists, ergonomists, political scientists, and anthropologists have developed specific research traditions and constituted important corpora of knowledge about this issue. In various contexts, important inter-disciplinary research has been already carried out on

labour. However, this basic anthropological phenomenon is associated with the most diverse meanings and values in various cultures, countries, and regions around the globe as well as with very contrasted social spaces and categories, such as gender, financial and symbolic reward, social hierarchies, cultural practices, etc. In line with these disparate understandings, the various disciplines of the human and social sciences have in most cases specialized around one set of issues or interrogations. We intend to invite scholars from various disciplines to go beyond their disciplinary traditions and to explore further the vast explanatory potential of labour, understood as a basic phenomenon of human life.

The second research object, *policy-making*, has similarly given way to various constructions. The definition of the boundary between the private and the public spheres, the formulation and the treatment – or the non-treatment – of public problems are the core elements of policy-making. Those fundamental operations, however, take very distinct forms in various spaces and cultures. They imply power relations both in the in-put and the out-put dimensions of policy-making. These basic aspects of policy-making provide important venues for comparative analysis.

Lastly, we consider important to stimulate comparative research on the work of *categorization*, which various societies and communities provide. This more abstract question is of decisive importance as it relates the classical processes of stratification with intellectual operations, mobilizing knowledge, justifications, as well as normative or belief systems of the most varied kinds. These phenomena have mostly given way to compartmentalized research, anchored in specific disciplines. Cross-disciplinary comparative analysis on the work of categorization is a promising research perspective we intend to stimulate.

- The third objective of this book is to take seriously the challenges that the *process of rescaling of social relations* poses to the comparative analysis. For a longer time now, the nation is not any more considered as being the “natural” space or frame for comparison. We propose a reflection upon comparative methods that would take into account the multi-scalarity of social phenomena. What are the most relevant frames of social interactions in the context of multi-sited processes? From elementary forms of kinship and family structures that frame social positions and determine identities to the capitalist system that relates cultures, social groups and individuals in interdependent and productive links, the most varied social forms and mechanisms frame social relations across regions, institutions, and cultures. The mobility of actors, concepts, instruments, categories, institutions, etc., is a key mechanism relating spaces and scales, understood as spaces of social interaction. Research about the logics of articulation of those various dynamics is presently expanding in the disciplines of the human and social sciences. Our book will foster, organize and document a dialogue among the available approaches.

Digital communication and information technologies enable to accumulate and bring together an unprecedented amount of knowledge from different parts of the globe. The inherited frames from methodological nationalism and rigid disciplinary boundaries are however still the basis of most research practices in the social sciences. In the book *Decentering comparative analysis*, we intend to overcome those inherited frames not to negate their valuable contributions but to develop methods that are more in line with the structural transformations of our societies. The triple decentering we propose – from geographic and cultural perspectives, from disciplinary traditions, and from fixed scalar analytical frames – aims at contributing to an ambitious update of comparative analysis.

## Authors' Seminars

In order to invite you to participate to our project and to contribute to this edited book, we will hold two authors' seminars on the *14-15 September 2017* and on the *25-26 January 2018*.

The first seminar of mid-September 2017 will be dedicated to two complementary issues: the *tensions between global and local comparative dimensions* and *the comparative analysis in the context of raising mobility of social actors, ideas, institutions*, etc. The second seminar of late January 2018 will tackle the issue of *the new horizons of the comparative analysis*.

Both dimensions to be treated during the first seminar of September 2017 – comparative analysis between global and local on the one hand and comparative analysis and mobility on the second – are related to each other in many ways. First of all, we think that the global scale is not only a relevant scale for the unilateral “diffusion” of political or policy ideas or concrete instruments or categories by more or less abstract global actors or institutions such as the World Bank or the WHO. Rather, we conceive this space as a relevant domain for action and interaction of various actors with an intense competition amongst various views, social networks and political traditions. Actors such as companies, high-ranking politicians, scientists, sports-women or –men, cultural or religious leaders, etc. compete within this global scale and can be highly mobile. Other scales such as the local or the national are not passive receptacles of slogans, ideas, technical devices coming from global spheres. They are active contexts made of actors, networks, cultures, traditions, organizations, socioeconomic resources of the most various kind. They enter into interactive dialogues with the global sphere. Research findings on the interplay between various scales as well as studies of mobilities and circulations of ideas, actors or resources across scales are to be discussed during this first seminar.

The authors' seminar of January 2018 will deal with the new horizons of comparative analysis. This seminar will shed light on innovative methods, research objects, ways of conceiving comparison. Combining the scales of analysis, qualitative and quantitative analysis, temporal and spatial analysis, crossing the boundaries of disciplines and other innovative ways of handling comparative research will be welcomed during this second seminar. The three areas of research we propose to focus on – labour, policy making, categorizing – will give way to new forms of comparative research and shall be confronted during this second seminar.