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Schröder, Wilhelm Heinz

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# International Commission for the Application of Quantitative Methods in History

# ICAQMH

CROSS-NATIONAL COMPARATIVE RESEARCH: SOME PRACTICAL REMARKS

Wilhelm Heinz Schröder<sup>+</sup>

Sydney Verba, scientific director of the "Cross-National Program in Political and Social Change", reflected back on his many years of practical experience with cross-national research and formulated the essential question:

"Cross-national research is time-consuming, expensive, often frustrating, and many times more complex than research carried on within a single national context. Given these facts, why should anyone attempt research that is cross-national?"(1)

In the following presentation I will try, with appropriate brevity, to look closely at the causes for, the relationships between, and the consequences of the facts referred to by S. Verba, and to find answers to his question regarding the justification of comparative research. In doing so it is necessary to elaborate some of the important arguments for the urgent role of cross-national research, also in the field of quantitative history, and to offer selected suggestions for its practical application in the future. This presentation is primarily based on the evaluation of experiences gathered in the last two decades in the field of "Cross-National Comparative Survey Research", which can be related to organizations such as the "Standing Committee on Comparative Research" (SCOCRES)(2) of the "International Social Science Council" (ISSC)(3) and the "European Coordination Center for Research and Documentation in the Social Sciences" (Vienne/Austria)(4).

In order to avoid any misunderstanding, I would first like to make a few remarks regarding terminology. In accordance with considerations made by Stein Rokkan(5), I distinguish between the terms "international" and "cross-national":

cross-national refers to the objects of comparison  
e.g. the nations themselves are the  
units of analysis

international refers to the structure of research  
organization, e.g. research is carried  
out by individuals and facilities from/  
in various countries

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<sup>+</sup> Address all communication: Wilhelm Heinz Schröder, ICAQMH, The Secretary General, Technische Universität Berlin, Institut für Geschichtswissenschaft, Ernst-Reuter-Platz 7, D-1000 Berlin 10.

In accordance with the intentions of the "International Commission for the Application of Quantitative Methods in History"(ICAQMH) (6), the main attention in my study is given to the variants of international cross-national comparative historical research.

The question regarding the general significance of both international and cross-national research can be answered rather easily in a broad sense: they serve the formation of a scientific community not confirmed to existing political, cultural, and social perimeters. Necessary prerequisites for the formation of such a scientific community would be, among others:

- initiation and development of networks for information exchange, discussion, and cooperation on an international level;
- integration of and further development of existing and/or mutual development of new scientific approaches in regard to paradigms, theories, models, terminology, methods, techniques, sources, etc.;
- diffusion of the scientific community to countries in which organized research is either weakly developed or entirely lacking.

These prerequisites for a worldwide scientific community are only partially met within the historical sciences themselves; in the field of quantitative historical research and especially quantitative comparative historical research, however, only preliminary attempts have been made to meet them thus far. (7)

The first precondition for the organization of a cross-national research project is the establishment of a mutual cognitive interest which could serve as the basis for applying a cross-national comparative method. In this context a simplified taxonomy was proposed by Erwin K. Scheuch(8), Scheuch's taxonomy is two-dimensional. The first dimension refers to the function of the nation in the analysis, on one hand it is the unit of analysis, on the other a set of conditions for other units of analysis on a lower level of aggregation. The second dimension refers to the aim of the cross-national comparison:

Aim of the Comparison	Application of the Context "Nation"	
	Nation as Unit of Analysis	Nation as Set of Conditions for the Units of Analysis
Confirmation of Similarities	<u>Case I:</u> Identification of "Universals"	<u>Case III:</u> Proof of the General Validity of Theses
Confirmation of Dissimilarities	<u>Case II:</u> Determination of Characteristics	<u>Case IV:</u> Determination of Space-Time Coordinates for Generalization

The confirmation of similarities and dissimilarities. From the two-dimensional reference field arise four basic variants which represent differentiated cognitive interests:

- (1) Identification of Universals:  
Aim is the confirmation of similarities among nations; nations serve here as units of analysis
- (2) Determination of National Characteristics: Aim is the confirmation of dissimilarities between nations; nations serve as units of analysis.
- (3) Proof of the General Validity of Theses: Aim is the confirmation of similarities among units of analysis, which are clustered at a lower level than the level of national aggregation; nations serve as sets of marginal conditions for these units of analysis.
- (4) Determination of Space-Time Coordinates: Aim is the confirmation of dissimilarities between units of analysis, which are clustered at a lower level of national aggregation; nations serve as sets of marginal conditions for these units of analysis.

If the precise formulation of the cognitive interest confirms the decision to institute cross-national comparative research, than the necessary organization of research will have to be designed to carry out the project. Without going into detail at this point the logical course of research entails the four basic phases which follows(9):

- (1) Research Planing, including:
  - establishing topics, guiding ideas, theories, models, terminology, etc.
  - establishing which nations are to be investigated
  - establishing which nations will take part in the investigation and in which aspect: personally, materially/immaterially
  - establishing the organizational structure of the project to ensure coordination and cooperation
  - obtaining means and resources necessary to carry out the project
  - establishing research design
- (2) Gathering Data, including:
  - screening and selection of sources
  - establishing data-gathering techniques
- (3) Processing and Analysis of Data, including:
  - establishing data-processing techniques
  - establishing analysis strategies and correspondingly adequate analysis methods
- (4) Interpretation and Presentation of Results, including:
  - establishing techniques for interpretation
  - establishing forms of presentation
  - establishing in which context results are to be used.

In research practice numerous variations of these four research phases can be generated depending on organization. Stein Rokkan developed a heuristically very useful typology of cross-national comparative research, in which he presents the variants resulting when each of the four research phases is considered in conjunction with the following plausible dimensions(10):

- Dimension 1: national or international performance
- Dimension 2: centralized or integrated or disjunct performance(11)
- Dimension 3: focussed or sequential performance(12)

It is not appropriate here to consider the potentials and limitations of each of the possible variants nor to discuss the ensuing implications for the course of research. If we limit ourselves to the variants important for our purposes, those found in the first dimension, then according to St. Rokkan there are six main types in the realm of practical cross-national research. They are, however, of highly varied practical relevance to historical research; only four types (No. 1,2,3,6) should be discussed here.

Type	National Research	"Imperialistic" Research	Repliative Research	Regression to National Research	Inter-national except Interpret.	Complete Inter-national
Phase	1	2	3	4	5	6
Planning	National	National	National	Inter-national	Inter-national	Inter-national
Data Gathering	National	Inter-national	Inter-national	Inter-national	Inter-national	Inter-national
Processing	National	National	Inter-national	National	Inter-national	Inter-national
Interpretation	National	National	National	National	National	Inter-national

The first main type - National Cross-National Research - represents one of two extremes within the typology: there is absolutely no international coordination, cooperation, or communication in any of the four phases. Research is done solely in one country, usually in one research center. This extreme case is obviously the one most commonly found in actual practice in the historical sciences. When inter-national comparative topics are researched at all, then international participation is excluded. The attempt is made to avoid international research and any negative implications it may have, but this is done without regard for the possible negative implications for the outcome of the merely national research project itself. And yet one realizes (for good reason) that the main source of the negative consequences of the Verbian facts lies in the inter-

nationality of inter-national research. In addition to adopting this avoidance strategy, many considerations, including those of science policy but above all non-scientific ones, favour the "pragmatic" decision for national inter-national research.

In spite of the fact that this main type No. 1 may not seem especially suitable for the purpose of our work within the framework of an international commission, it will nevertheless continue to dominate cross-national research for some time. Such research could however, be improved by means of a possible international initiative, especially in the area of data gathering. An examination of available cross-national projects, for example those dealing with historical demography, economic history or social history, reveals that most of these studies are characterized by the absence of primary data gathering, in other words by a reliance on data already statistically processed. These studies resort to the publication of private and, more often, official statistics. The processing of already existing data, however, could be taken over by large data banks and data archives, whereby data collection and documentation could be accomplished with the help of competent researchers from respective countries. Worth mentioning are two working institutions which, among others, are exemplary in an organizational sense for such archiving and documentation of data: "The Inter-University-Consortium for Political and Social Research" (ICPSR, Ann Arbor/USA), an individual facility, and the "International Federation of Data Organisations for the Social Sciences" (IFDO), an association on a supranational level.(13)

There is, without a doubt a certain risk accompanying the machine processing and archiving of cross-national data: the chance that the data are seen as a sort of "instant data" and as such consumed arbitrarily, which could lead to incompetent data work or even data misuse. However, the disfunctional use or the feasible misuse of data must certainly not be considered a decisive argument against this type of data archiving or related data service - unless, of course - to use an analogy of law - one mixes up the criminal and the instrument of crime. Also, reservation, or more specifically stated, prejudice has been and is still being expressed regarding the use of computer-based statistical packages.(14) It is feared that incompetent persons without the slightest understanding of statistics could try and make use of complex statistical procedures.

Equally serious are the repeated criticisms aimed at cross-national studies which utilize already existing statistical data stemming from national surveys in the past. One is justified in pointing to the obvious defects in data gathering and processing which seem to call into question the effectiveness and general credibility of cross-national studies. What demands should then be put on cross-national comparative statistics? In a strict sense "harmonized" data for every country are essential to inter-national comparisons. In order to be useful, each national data survey would have to fulfill the following conditions, simultaneously and uniformly(15):

- establishing uniform definitions (including consideration of identification problems),
- establishing which data is to be gathered,
- establishing the operationalization of terms and concepts to be studied under consideration of equivalence problems,
- establishing uniform methods of data gathering,
- establishing uniform time and space for data gathering,
- establishing statistical processing methods,
- establishing demands related to standardization,
- establishing the scope of interpretation for the data to be evaluated.

Such conditions are not currently fulfilled by cross-national statistics or even by national statistics. The problem lies to a lesser degree with the necessary increases in time and money investments, but rather with the politically-oriented "desireability" for harmonized data. In spite of all attempts since the middle of the 19th century to standardize statistics to even a small degree, all previous national statistics vary more or less in the context of all aforementioned conditions for harmonization - given that data were gathered at all. Whoever is not satisfied with a mere juxtaposition of statistics that are as such hardly comparable and wishes further to utilize statistical analysis techniques, should attempt to improve statistical comparability through adjustment calculations. Adjustment calculations should be quantitative estimates of the differing definitions, collection and processing methods on a national level to achieve international comparability. Such adjustment calculations clearly would most easily be carried through using competently processed machine-readable data, which again emphasizes the need for and the value of the type of data archiving previously discussed.

In the second main type - the "imperialistic" international cross-national research - all research planning and data evaluation is carried out at one national research center. The gathering of data, also under the authority of the center, is the only phase which involves native personnel from selected key countries, although this personnel has no decision-making power in research-related questions. This second type has achieved a somewhat sad renown primarily as a result of the American inter-national survey research in the 1950's and 1960's. (16) For the purpose of the work within the context of the ICAQMH this "imperialistic" type of research should be avoided wherever and whenever possible - partly because of the dubiousness of its results but also because of its discriminating effect on the scientific personnel from the countries providing data. It must be mentioned that a formal similarity to the situation just described emerges within the subcategory of national cross-national research making use of internationally-compiled data from data archives; however, in this case the restrictive consequences of "imperialistic" research are avoided for the most part.

Given the current circumstances, the third main type - the replicative international cross-national research - deserves special recognition as one which should be given priority and promoted in the

short-range and middle-range strategies of the ICAQMH. In one country a research project is exemplarily conceptualized, carried out and evaluated. A research center in another country adopts the concept of the primary study, carries through with the respective, "harmonized" data collecting, analyzes its own findings in conjunction with the available data file from the primary study and in this manner arrives at an evaluation of at least a bi-nationally comparative nature. Replicative research can in this sense, at least within certain boundaries, steer clear of the disadvantages of uni-national research without giving up any of its advantages.

The systematic international application of replicative studies as a form of cross-national comparative research is subject to two primary preconditions:

- Primary studies must not only claim to possess a model character and cross-national comparability, but in addition the presence of these traits must be acknowledged by the scientific community as a whole.
- Primary studies which have been acknowledged must be adequately documented for each research phase; for practical quantitative research this entails above all a compatible processing suitable to the needs of the user, a detailed documentation and the continuous supply of machine-readable data files for the international secondary analysis.

The systematic archiving, evaluation and supply of such data files can only be alleviated by service centers with adequate facilities; as an example I would like to mention the "Center for Historical Social Research" (Cologne/FRG). (17)

The sixth main type - the completely international cross-national research - is characterized by its complete internationality in each of the four research phases. As the second of the extreme types it offers a maximum amount of international coordination, communication and cooperation. A research project which displays consistently international participation in every research phase can be regarded as the noblest form of comparative research. On this note I would like to make some comments in the relationship between internationality and cross-nationality.

In accordance with research logic, the nations which should become objects of inter-national research are those which are appropriate because of their theoretical relevance and also necessary to a comparative study. But the selection of nations based on theoretical relevance is usually highly complicated by determinants of practical relevance. This conflict results either in a compromise between theory and practice of one sort or another, or results in the eventual abandonment of selection based on theoretical considerations. The reason why a theoretically relevant nation does not actually take part in a research project are many, for example:

- The country lacks the relatively extensive amount of financial means to conduct the national part of the cross-national research project.



- The country lacks qualified scientific personnel and/or research facilities present are operating at maximum capacity and thus not capable of accomodating cross-national projects.
- The country considers it inappropriate to take part in a cross-national research project for political reasons.
- The country feels that the benefits for or value of a cross-national project are too low for the country itself, independent of the project's international significance and esteem ... etc.

These reasons could be formulated in reverse to produce a list of reasons why a country - independent of its previously-established theoretical suitability - would participate in a cross-national project. For this main type it can generally be assumed that every country that actively participates in a project is itself an object of research at the same time.

Initiating and providing guidance for type No. 6 projects should be some of the utmost goals of the ICAQMH. Such projects should be sponsored by either the ICAQMH itself or by another recognized professional international body in order to avoid even the slightest impression of "imperialistic" dominance.

What can we do for inter-national comparative quantitative research?

In the very next future we should form a committee within the framework of the International Commission for the Application of Quantitative Methods in History - a "Standing Committee on Comparative Quantitative History" similar to the sociologists committee.(18) The purpose of this Standing Committee would first be to design a program to promote quantitative comparative research and to take the necessary steps in making it a reality. The next International Congress of Historical Sciences 1985(19) might be a suitable forum for introducing the program and its goals to a diverse scientific group and winning the support of new persons interested in the endeavour.

#### FOOTNOTES

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1 S. Verba, The Cross-National Program in Political and Social Change: a History and some Comments, in: A. Szalai and R. Pettrella, 1977, p. 179-180. - The Program began in the summer 1964, eight countries (India, Japan, Mexico, Nigeria, USA, and later Austria, the Netherlands and Yugoslavia) were involved. Verba's paper deals with the organizational history of the program and with some relevant problems in cross-national research.

2 For a short report on the work of the SCOCRES see: Social Science Information 11, 1972, p. 129-140. - During the last years

the committee had emphasized the building of an infrastructure for comparative research, in particular: facilitating cross-national training in advanced techniques and enlarging the relations between data-organizations within the framework of the "International Federation of Data-Organizations for the Social Sciences" (IFDO). The SCOCRES has the following structure: 1. infrastructure (IFDO-representation), 2. training facilities (representation of established summer-schools in comparative research), 3. forum for comparative research (sponsorship and coordination of comparative projects).

- 3 For reports on the work of the ISSC see: St. Rokkan and K. Szczerba-Likiernik, Introduction, in: St. Rokkan, 1968; and: St. Rokkan, 1972; and: A. Szalai and R. Petrella, Introduction, in: A. Szalai and R. Petrella, 1977, p. VII-XVIII. - The ISSC was established by UNESCO in 1951 as a central body for the organization of co-operative projects across disciplines and across countries.
- 4 See: A. Szalai and R. Petrella, 1977, p. IX-XVI. - The Vienna Centre was set up by the ISSC in 1963 as an institutional base for co-operative projects between Eastern and Western social scientists.
- 5 St. Rokkan, 1972, p. 1-11.
- 6 See: Historical Social Research 16, 1980, p. 71.
- 7 For a report on recent comparative studies by an American historian see: G.M. Fredrickson, Comparative History, in: M. Kammen, 1980, p. 457-473. For the position of quantitative history within the field of comparative research cf. E.K. Scheuch's remarks on "Quantitative Analysis of Historical Material as an Extension of Comparativism", in: J.M. Clubb and E.K. Scheuch, 1980, p. 40-43. For the number of quantitative comparative projects within the American historical research see: R.P. Swierenga, 1974. For the number of cross-national comparative projects within the German historical social research see: W. Bick et al., 1981, p. XXI-XXIX, according to this documentation of research there were 19% (1979, n = 402), 17% (1980, n = 485) and 11% (1981, n = 417) of all projects which covered more than one nation.
- 8 E.K. Scheuch, 1973, p. 222-227.
- 9 Cf. W.A. Glaser, The Process of Cross-National Survey Research, in: A. Szalai and R. Petrella, 1977, p. 403-435.
- 10 St. Rokkan, 1972, p. 11-17.
- 11 This second dimension concerns the ways deciding on research designs; centralized: one organization or one person makes all decisions on the design; integrated: the collaborators come from different countries and make decisions jointly; disjunct: the

collaborators share certain common interests; they join voluntarily, interact intermittently, and may drop out at any time; they may or may not adopt identical ideas and methods; each gathers and interprets data in his own way, each writes his own manuscript. Cf. W.A. Glaser, *Process*, p. 404.

- 12 This third dimension concerns the time span of the research; focussed: all collaborators follow the same stages at nearly the same time; sequential: successive replications occur in sites, manuscripts accumulate gradually. Cf. W.A. Glaser, *Process*, p. 404.
- 13 The ICPSR was established in 1962 (located in the Institute for Social Research at the University of Michigan) and represents a partnership between the Center for Political Studies and in the meantime more than 200 members (universities, colleges); see e.g.: *Guide to resources and services 1981-82, Ann Arbor (1981)*. IFDO was founded in 1977. Cf. Ekkehard Mochmann and Paul J. Müller, *Data Protection and Access to Social-Science Data*, in: *International Social Science Journal* 31, 1979, p. 162-165.
- 14 Cf. H. Best and W.H. Schröder, *Basiscurriculum für eine quantitative historische Sozialforschung*, in: *Historical Social Research* 17, 1981, p. 22-25.
- 15 Cf. F. Gehrman, *Methodologische Probleme der Konstruktion international vergleichbarer Indikatoren*, in: H.-J. Hoffmann-Nowotny, 1980, p. 23-51.
- 16 Cf. St. Rokkan et al., 1969.
- 17 For the work of the Center for Historical Social Research see DATA NEWS section of *Historical Social Research*. The Center was founded in 1977; the data services of the Center include:  
1. archiving machine-readable historical data; 2. preparing machine-readable historical data for secondary analysis; 3. improving methods and technique for archiving and secondary analysis of machine-readable historical data, 4. assisting and supporting historians and sociologists in collecting quantitative historical data, in preparing new or comparative machine-readable data, in acquiring existing data files, or in analyzing quantitative historical data; 5. training scholars in historical social research (summer school); 6. developing teaching packages for historical social research.
- 18 According to the par. 9 of the ICQAMH-Statute (approved on March 6, 1982) the ICAQMH-Bureau is empowered to establish standing committees for special tasks of the ICAQMH.
- 19 See: Comité International des Sciences Historiques, *Lettre d'Information* 1, 1982, p. 12-29. - The 16th Congress will take place in Stuttgart (FRG) from Aug. 26 - Sep. 1, 1985.

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