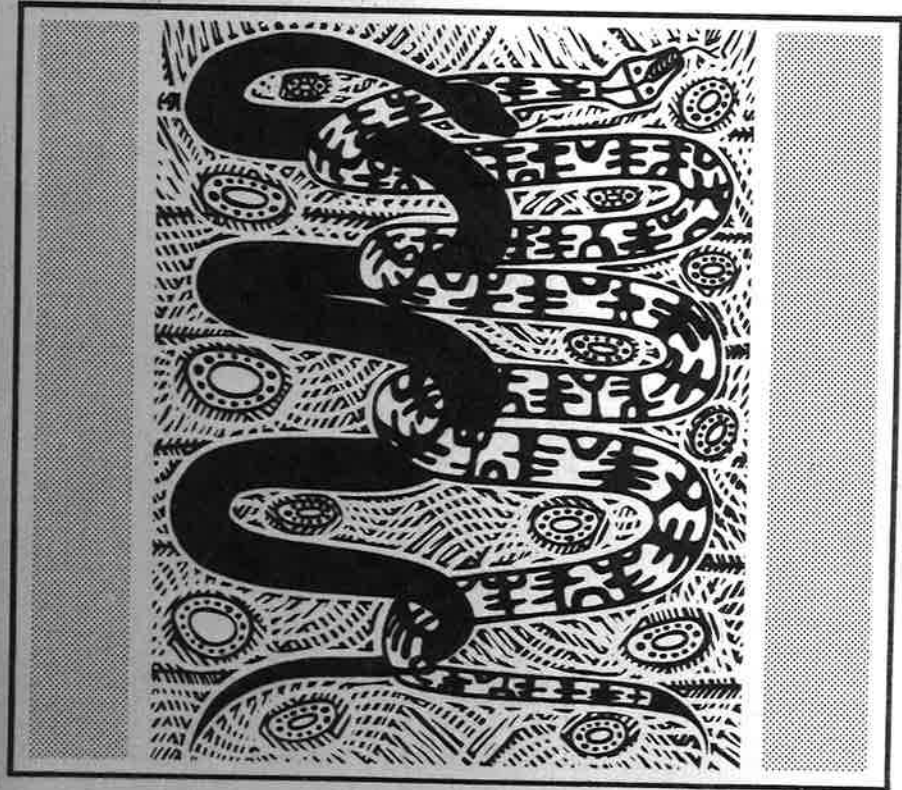


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## taking issue

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### **The Importance of Non-scientific Approaches to Comparative Studies<sup>1</sup> — Malcolm Alexander**

In the pages of this journal, in the programmes of the ACSANZ Conferences and in a range of monographs and books there is an impressive quantity and variety of genuinely comparative Australian-Canadian studies. It would be a straightforward task to catalogue this material according to its disciplinary impetus or specific content. For example, there are now major cumulations of writing in both Australian-Canadian comparative politics and comparative literature. There is a coherent body of work on a range of issues associated with indigenous peoples' rights in these two countries. Such a catalogue, however, would not provide a guide to the structure and direction of the field as a whole. At a more mundane level, it would not contribute to the task confronted by conference organisers and journal editors - that of identifying and labelling common themes and issues generated by the juxtaposition of varied and disparate studies in these contexts.

This essay argues that the structure and direction of the field of Australian-Canadian studies should be approached through consideration of its *comparative* nature, not its disciplinary bases nor its content areas. The philosophy and methodology of comparative study tend to have a strong bias toward hypothesis-testing procedures however. This paper argues that Australian-Canadian studies must take its cue from other strategies of comparative study and exemplifies these alternative approaches by reference to three areas of Australian-Canadian studies with which I am involved.

#### **Comparative Studies: Macrocausal Analysis and What Else?**

Macrosociology is an area where comparative study has made an explicit contribution to the development of theory and methodology. A major school of writing has grown up around the work of Theda Skocpol. While her major area of interest is the genesis of social revolution, she is also involved in a research collective which is focusing on comparative studies of the origins of welfare states in Europe and North America. This comparative work needs to be located within a definite disciplinary background - American comparative sociology, closely linked to the sub-disciplines of comparative politics and comparative public policy. The comparative studies of this school have led to a more general theoretical interest in state structures, a movement that has taken up the slogan of 'bringing

the state back in' (Evans, et al, 1985). Nevertheless, they maintain a strong commitment to comparative studies.

In an early exploration of the methods and exemplars of comparative sociological history, however, Skocpol and Somers (1980) argue for the recognition of various logics of comparative study and narrative exposition. This recognition is necessary, they suggest, as most accounts of the comparative method assume that it follows only one logic, that of a 'scientific' or 'experimental' analysis where conditions are manipulated to match cases as closely as possible except on the variable held to be causally significant. From this viewpoint, comparative historical study does not vary in its logic and methods, it merely presents practical problems by virtue of having comparatively few cases, each of which have a large number of possible causal variables.

This approach is possible in historical and cross-national comparative study, Skocpol and Somers suggest, but it is not the only approach. A second logic of comparison - which they label *parallel demonstration of theory* - can work by using multiple case studies to substantiate a general theory and, perhaps, find negative cases to establish the limits of that theory. A third distinct logic of comparison is that of a *contrast of contexts* where countries which are similar in some important respect are examined intensely so that the distinctive way each deals with that common similarity can be highlighted and understood as an aspect of its particular national 'context'. This last method is the most obviously appropriate to Australia and Canada, given the oft-noted range of similarities between them but the surprising points of difference.

Distinct logics of comparison are recognised by other writers. Hugh Streecon summed it up pithily by saying that 'The function of comparison is less to simulate experiment than to stimulate imagination.' (cited in Fogarty, 1981, p.413). Following Marc Bloch, Fogarty (1981) also suggests that testing hypotheses by the use of the comparative method is quite distinct from the practice of using a comparative perspective to better understand a particular society. However, there is still a presumption in these formulations that hypothesis testing with the comparative method is a rigorous and methodical scholarly task, whereas the value of the alternative approaches is not at all clear. Even Skocpol and Somers are ambivalent, seeing the other types of comparative research as limited, in the final instance, by the 'findings' of the hypothesis testing, macrocausal approach. There is, therefore, a strong allure of expertise and scientism associated with macrocausal analysis. The growing sophistication of comparative public policy analysis, for example, exemplifies this trend.

Without denying the achievements and rigour of this type of research, I want to argue that the alternatives to it need to be more seriously considered. In particular, I think we need to understand these alternatives not only in terms of the comparative logic they use, as Skocpol and Somers do, but also in terms of the substantive political issues, theories and problem-orientations they generate. To get to this point I want to consider some examples of comparative work in Australian-Canadian studies with which I have been involved.

### **Australia and Canada as Welfare States: Ideal Types or Political Contradictions?**

I have been working with a PhD student, Paul Chantrill, for the last three years on a comparison of the development of welfare policies in Australia and Canada. This project grew directly from an honours seminar where we had examined the comparative historical sociological material on the origins of welfare states, starting from the same theoretical premises as Skocpol and her collaborators. Initially Paul worked with the idea of the welfare state as some sort of policy goal or ideal type toward which both countries were heading, although with significant variations between a 'residual' model in Australia and a more complete 'institutional' model in Canada. As our discussions progressed it became harder to simply accept these distinct models (and the implicit evaluations they imply) and then move on with the macrocausal analysis of their different origins. Instead, we found it necessary to consider welfare developments as the outcome, in discrete national contexts, of a struggle between the contradictory principles of liberal democracy. As articulated by the Canadian political theorist, C.B. MacPherson, these are the state's protection of liberal, particularly property rights, as against the principle of politically generated social citizenship rights that come from the idea of the collective democratic sovereignty.

At first sight this research trajectory appears to follow the pattern, elaborated by Skocpol and Somers, of complementarity among the different sorts of comparative activity; hypotheses derived from a general theory are examined by means of a contrast-oriented comparative study which then leads to consideration of a different general theory. However, my claim would be that there is a more important shift whereby we had to move from a type of supposedly 'value-free' descriptive theorising to a mode of thinking that involves a recognition of the need to address real political issues and contradictions. In this instance, therefore, the comparative method did not emulate the scientific or experimental logic. On the contrary, we found that this logic itself obscured our understanding of the situation.

### **Settler Capitalism: Comparative vs World-Historic Explanations**

A second major interest I have had in the last few years is that of following debates about the nature of Australia's economic development in the nineteenth century. These debates focus on the usefulness or otherwise of the general comparative category - settler capitalism. The debates are limited to Australian issues and Canada has not figured as the major comparative instance - that position has been occupied by Argentina. Nevertheless there are important parallels and echoes of Canadian debates about the importance of staples theory in the interpretation of Canadian history. What the Australian debates show, however, is that a simple comparative logic can focus attention on the wrong unit

of analysis.

Proposing settler capitalism as a comparative analytic category, Denoon (1979: 1983) grouped six Southern hemisphere countries which had shared a common nineteenth-century experience of rapid expansion under the aegis of British capital. His cases were Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, Chile, Argentina and Uruguay and he sought to show what common features of development could explain their relative success in this era. He suggests that it was the ability of governments to secure the future for British investment that was the key factor which then allowed these countries to take advantage of the 'package of opportunities' offered by West European industrialisation. Given this central hypothesis his secondary explanatory task is that of showing how this common political response emerged in countries with economic and class structures as varied as those of South Africa and Uruguay. *Inter alia* he repeats labour history's hallowed assertion that Australia's high level of industrial and social interventionism in this period was the basis for our later development in the twentieth century.

Motivated by neo-liberal belief in the disadvantages of interventionism (market 'rigidities') and protectionism, John Fogarty's attacks on Denoon (Fogarty, 1981; Duncan and Fogarty, 1984) tend to focus on these secondary hypotheses. But Fogarty also questions Denoon's particular application of comparative method. According to Fogarty, Denoon's six cases do not exhibit a single common process of development. While each had regions which developed in a common fashion on the basis of the extensive exploitation of open grasslands, this was only a partial aspect of their development process as national economies. Denoon, he argues, has conflated the commonality across some economic regions to falsely posit a common national development programme.

The main points of contention in this debate stem from the implicit theories of each about the necessity (Denoon) or rejection (Fogarty) of state intervention in national development programmes. Therefore, insofar as each makes implicit claims that the comparative method gives 'scientific' legitimacy to their claims, the debate about comparative method only adds another layer of disagreement that further obscures the substantive political issues in the debate. My argument would be that the urge to establish a legitimating comparative logic is misplaced and, furthermore, prevents consideration of the correct unit of analysis. Thus, Denoon's basic theory is really one about the ways in which the 'imperialism of free trade' operated in the nineteenth century; the weakness of his argumentation is a narrative as much as a logical one in that he does not give us any plausible negative cases where the failure of a government to establish the confidence of capital can be argued to lead to underdevelopment.

What my suggestion involves is a switch from a cross-national comparative logic, which necessarily makes the nation-state the unit of analysis, to a consideration of the transnational operations of empire in this era and a strategic evaluation of what worked in certain circumstances and why. While comparison is one of the techniques used in the study of this larger historical, theoretical and

political object, I would argue that it is misleading to use the experimental and scientific logics as a guide to how this comparison proceeds since those logics limit consideration to particular units of analysis, either countries or economic regions, and not the larger transnational unit.

### Federalism: Brake or Engine on Welfare Growth?

A third set of debates which show the nature and limitation of the scientific/experimental logic of comparative study again deal with comparative policy studies of welfare programmes in Australia and Canada. In this area we have highly developed and rigorous comparative studies but there is an interesting tension between the problem-orientation of these studies and the directions that strict comparative methodology would push them.

There are specific Australian-Canadian comparisons in health policy, federal-State/provincial financial relations, foreign investment regulation, resource exploitation, multiculturalism and several other areas. At one level such comparisons deal with details of programme formulation and implementation but most comment on the political issue: does a federal system retard or advance the possibility of progressive change? Australian political scientists have usually argued that federalism is a regressive influence but a close examination of the Canadian case can lead to a significant re-evaluation of this assumption (Gray, 1988). It is, in fact, this focus on an Australian political problem - the trend to increasing centralism - that gives these works their interest, not the comparative aspects *per se*.

Commenting on this array of comparative studies, Kellow (1988) draws attention to the anomaly of using two similar federal systems to consider questions about the impact of federalism on welfare initiatives. If one were to create an experimental paradigm, the appropriate logic would be to consider the pattern of welfare development in another country as similar as possible to Australia and Canada but one with a unitary, not a federal system. New Zealand is the obvious case for this role, so obvious, in fact, that one could ask why has it not been included in these comparisons from the very beginning! If this had been done, however, the object of the comparison would have been the structure and dynamics of federal systems, a very useful piece of comparative politics but a shift away from the problem-orientation created by the immediate interest in the detailed understanding of political events in each country.

### Conclusion

In different ways these three examples show important limitations of the scientific/experimental logic of comparison in order to counterbalance the enormous allure that makes it appear as the one real comparative method. But, as stated earlier, there is no real guidance in the literature as to what the nature and logic of the alternative methods are. Skocpol and Somers' suggestions are

interesting but they are bounded by the type of theory they see as useful and the particular audience they would address.

The three sets of debates I have considered in this section have led me to make some suggestions about the alternative forms of comparative debate; they should retain a sense of the problem-orientation that gives rise to the comparison in one country, they need to be aware of the larger transnational context which contains the particular national cases being considered and they need to focus on questions of political theory rather than looking at 'ideal types'. The community of scholars working in Australian-Canadian studies is extensive and now has access to a substantial legacy of comparative work. The collective task which this essay proposes is that of identifying the substantive political issues which excite our continuing interest in these comparisons by virtue of the criteria of relevance which this essay discusses. In undertaking this task we must trust our own judgements about the importance of the substantive issues and we should not be taken in by the chimera of a 'scientific' logic of comparative study.

### **Notes**

1. This paper is an abridged version of the paper I presented to the ACSANZ Biennial Conference in Canberra, June, 1988.

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