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Abstract: One of the leading debates in social sciences concerns research design. However, in comparative politics, the predominant way conducting research misses out crucial aspects that are central to social theory. This article shows how method and empirical research are highly dependent on the definition of theory. Arguing that theory should not only give an explanation of the social phenomena in question but should also show how this relationship is constructed, this article outlines the consequence of such a perspective, namely that the collection of data should reflect both macro and micro perspectives and the analyses of data should be carried out using mixed methods. In conclusion, such an integrated framework is the most appropriate way to give valuable theoretical feedback, either by examination and revision of already established theories or by a contribution to the construction of new theory in the social sciences. It is important, though, that such a framework is applied in a systematized way.

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What about theory?

The consequences on a widened perspective of social theory

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What about theory?

The consequences on a widened perspective of social theory

One of the leading debates in social sciences concerns research design. However, in comparative politics, the predominant way conducting research misses out crucial aspects that are central to social theory. This article shows how method and empirical research are highly dependent on the definition of theory. Arguing that theory should not only give an explanation of the social phenomena in question but should also show how this relationship is constructed, this article outlines the consequence of such a perspective, namely that the collection of data should reflect both macro and micro perspectives and the analyses of data should be carried out using mixed methods. In conclusion, such an integrated framework is the most appropriate way to give valuable theoretical feedback, either by examination and revision of already established theories or by a contribution to the construction of new theory in the social sciences. It is important, though, that such a framework is applied in a systematized way.

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1. Introduction

Today, one of the leading debates in the social sciences concerns research design . This is of course praiseworthy and maybe the most frequent discussions regard the question on how to look at and possibly integrate traditionally polarized perspectives such as macro and micro theories and different types of methods (see: Brady and Collier eds. 2004; Gerring 2010; Mahoney 2001). Despite this intense debate, the predominant way of conducting research in the field of comparative politics lacks the potential to give a valuable theoretical contribution, since research processes often miss out crucial aspects of the foundations of theory. More concrete, empirical research is frequently unsatisfactory, often evaluating macro or micro dimensions of social theory without realizing the importance of an integrated theoretical framework. Building on this ongoing debate and adding contributions mainly from analytical sociology (Hedström 2005; Hedström and Bearman eds. 2009), which in many ways is leading the retreat of a social science characterized by theoretical rigor and empirical holism, I will show how greater clarity can be reached in the examination

and construction of theory in comparative politics. Follow-on paragraph style: use this for each subsequent paragraph.

In this article I will argue that methodological and empirical approaches are highly dependent on our perspective of theory. This is true even in comparative social science, which is known for being characterized not by a certain issue but by a certain method, *to compare*. This objective will be reached by schematizing a traditional research process and then by discussing the view on theory in particular, the dimension of empirical inquiry and finally the question of method.

2. Schematizing the research process

By identifying a research process some of the ambitions in this article will hopefully be clearer. See figure 1 where the different stages in the research process are described.

With this model creating the point of departure for the following discussion, several dynamic features can be noticed. The research process is of course guided by the purpose of the research and the question(s) derived from this purpose. These two dimensions strongly influence the methodological choice. This choice has two possible outcomes: a deductive or an inductive approach.¹ These methodological concerns refer to the use of theory, where deductive research has its main purpose in empirically examining the accuracy of established theories. On the contrary, inductive research proceeds from empirical studies to end in theoretical constructions (Hume 2002; Popper 1980). No matter what choice is made, the practical method is not restricted by this. Theorists of comparative politics (Lijphart 1971; Peters 1988) have identified three methods of comparative research: the statistical method, the

¹ This distinction is deliberately made because of its analytical power, not ignoring the fact that both of the approaches only are theoretically true and that a combination of these two is often explicitly used, known as abduction.

comparative method, and the case study.² A common separation when discussing method is the distinction between quantitative and qualitative approaches.³ Without being willing to contribute to this divide, because as we will see the purpose of this research is quite the opposite, it should be said that the statistical method can clearly be characterized as a quantitative approach while the case study is normally filled with qualitative techniques. Somewhere in the middle the comparative method can be found, since it alternates between the two approaches.

Continuing with theory, this discussion will only focus on the deductive approach since inductive research is less shaped by declared theoretical statements. The distinction between macro and micro theory has a long tradition, especially in sociology. In relation to the macro paradigm, associated with the golden age of comparative politics initiated in the 1950s, systems theory (Almond and Powell 1966; Deutsch 1966; Easton 1965; Luhmann 1995) and structural–functionalism (Merton 1957; Parsons 1939) were long term cornerstones of social science. With an extremely aggregated focus, these approaches were criticized for lack of empirical connection. The alternative, micro theory, arose during the 1960s with individual actors in the center, and the research regarded political culture (Almond and Verba 1965; Inkeles 1969), voting behavior (Lipset 1960) and humans' rational actions (Downs 1957; Simon 1957). A compromise between these two, meso theory, is in comparative politics analytically limited to, for example, regions, sub-national levels, or institutions (Merton 1957; Peters 1998: 117–126) with the aim integrating macro perspective's general assumptions with micro theory's potential to enter the black

² Lately, social experiments have been more widely discussed in political science, i.e. Alvarez and Katz, eds. (2009).

³ It should be noticed, though, that in practice the inductive approach is often more strongly related to qualitative methods and the deductive approach more related to quantitative methods.

box. Strongly related to this traditional theoretical separation is the ontological distinction between structure and agency, found in the tradition of European sociology (e.g. Bourdieu 1998; Giddens 1984; Simmel 1976).

So far, it has been established that choices concerning purpose, method and theory will influence a research process. Highly dependent on these earlier choices, the actual empirical study often characterizes the research. Of special interest is where to place the analytical focus. In a deductive study testing a hypothesis deduced from macro theory, the empirical data will be gathered to correspond to this level of analysis. The corresponding logic will be used when it comes to hypotheses derived from micro theory. In an inductive study the point of departure is not theory but the phenomenon of interest. For example, if the ambition is to explain the presence of fascist regimes, empirical studies at a macro level are reasonable. On the other hand, if the aim is to explain citizens' inclination for political participation a micro perspective appears to be plausible. This is the regular way of doing science in comparative social science but it has a major deficit since such an approach ignores the fact that data underlying a study are not only related to a horizontal context but also to a vertical one (Przeworski and Teune 1970: 12). In other words, a holistic perspective of social science needs to consider the milieu of social phenomenon.

The final stage in a research process considers the theoretical implications of the empirical study. In a deductive research process the outcome of the test of hypotheses should verify, modify, or reject the theoretical fundamentals shaping the study. Since comparative studies are normally based on either macro or micro theory, their contribution to theory is delimited to one of these perspectives. The same logic is applicable to inductive studies, with the crucial difference that these result in the creation of new theoretical fundamentals, not mere revision of former ones.

Figure 1

Summing up this schematic visualization of the research process, three particularly dynamic dimensions will be the base of the following discussion. First of all, the division between macro and micro theories leads to fundamental problems. Such a distinction actually hinders theoretical constructions that can, as I will show, meet the definition of social theory. Further, this divide makes it hard not only for theory to postulate relations between variables but also to explain how they are causally connected. Much effort has been placed on bridging this gap and creating integrated theoretical perspectives (for an overview see: Ritzer 2000: ch. 15), and such an ambition will be continued in this contribution. This is also closely related to the empirical topic. The often separated focus in empirical studies leads to related problems, since analyses in social science should consider explanations from different possible analytical levels. As has been argued, ignoring vertical context can be dangerous and will limit our understanding of social phenomena.

Finally, the actual choice of method should normally be guided by the connection between the purpose and the research questions. This often implies a theoretical relation where the examination or creation of theory influence the purpose and thereby the choice of method. The method that gives the maximal possibilities to reach the purpose should be chosen (Coppedge 1999). However, this must be understood in relation to the purpose's background and the question of what good social science is. The legitimacy in conducting scientific research can be traced to both epistemological and societal issues. The first concerns the need for research to actually be said to be scientific, known as the demarcation problem (Kuhn 1970; Popper 1980). There is no room here for elaborating upon this complicated question,

more than stating that a purpose should point out a direction which can be classified as scientifically justified. The second aspect is discussed by King et al. (1994: 15; see also Brady and Collier eds. 2004: ch. 12) who argue that a purpose should focus both on problems that are important in the 'real world' and on those that contribute to the theoretical knowledge which is the foundation for the construction of scientific explanations.

Based on this, three dimensions will be handled in turn. First, the perspective of social theory is discussed, followed by corresponding discussions about empirical inquiry and methods; thereby, the whole research process will be addressed.

3. A theoretical integration

Theories in the social sciences can be understood with reference to two characteristics. First, they are *explanatory*, that is they explain and predict social phenomena in a universal way. Using the logic from Hume (2002), it is also necessary that social theories are *causal*, namely they stipulate the social mechanism(s) that connect *explanans* with *explanandum* (Hedström and Swedberg eds. 1998: ch. 1; Hedström 2005; Przeworski and Teune 1970: 74). In other words, theory should not only point out the universal relation between the independent and dependent variable but also determine the causal mechanism(s) that explain the link between the variables (Hedström and Swedberg eds. 1998: ch. 1; Elster 2007: 36).

Before I continue this discussion, the much debated question concerning causal mechanisms must be addressed. Letting the I-M-O model (Hedström and Swedberg eds. 1998: ch. 1) frame the discussion gives both pedagogical and analytical advantages. Here the *explanans* (I) is linked with the *explanandum* (O) through an intervening causal mechanism (M). Concerning the concept of mechanism there is, though, a semantic confusion. Gerring (2007a) identifies nine meanings of

the word, as it is used in contemporary social science, and Mahoney finds additional ones (2001), though reducing them to three broader categories of definition. Gerring settles with a minimalistic one, stating that mechanism is the agency or means by which an effect is produced or a purpose accomplished (2007a: 163). Mahoney (2001) has claimed that the cause activates a mechanism that is sufficient to produce a certain outcome, and others (Ragin 1987; Falleti and Lynch 2009) have refined this description by stressing the importance of context. Although this can seem to be quite uncomplicated, the character of mechanisms often makes it complex. They are proven to be hard to identify⁴, vague, interrelated and not always linear (Hedström and Swedberg eds. 1998: ch. 5; Gerring 2010; Mayntz 2004). In addition some crucial aspects of social mechanisms are still highly debated. Concerning the status of the causal mechanism, it is described as both an intervening variable (King et al. 1994) and a concept with a different ontological meaning than this (Falleti and Lynch 2009; Mahoney 2001). I prefer the second alternative, which falls back on the view of mechanisms as links between variables and therefore they are analytically different from the entities that they bind together. By transforming the ‘black-box’ to a ‘transparent box’ the properties, activities and relations that connect variables with each other, namely the causal mechanisms, can be clarified (Hedström and Ylikoski 2010: 51). Another dispute concerns whether causal mechanisms lead to deterministic outcomes (Mahoney 2001) or not. The ontological notion that the foundation of social science is based on probabilistic and not natural laws makes it quite clear, and such a statement can be stressed with reference to different mechanistic outcomes due to context (Falleti and Lynch 2009; King et al. 1994).

⁴ Some scholars even argue that they cannot be identified. See: Bennet (2003), Mahoney (2001), and the counter-argument from Hedström and Ylikoski (2010).

In figure 2 this discussion is related to theory. In a schematized description, macro theory expresses universal relations between X and Y while micro theory identifies the causal mechanisms (M) linking them together. How the latter is done and why it must include micro theory are crucial questions. The main reason for tackling mechanisms with the help of micro theory is that the explanation of social mechanisms is found in interaction between individuals and other individuals, or between individuals and a social aggregate (Hedström and Swedberg eds. 1998: ch. 2). Even if Falletti and Lynch (2009: 1150) have recognized how causal mechanisms are found on different analytical levels, there are convincing arguments for letting the micro level be the point of departure. Referring to Coleman (1986; see also: Liska 1990) Hedström and Swedberg (1998) identify three different situations in which causal mechanisms can operate. The first (macro-micro) specifies a case where the individual actor is present in a specific social situation that will affect him. The second (micro-micro) relates to how psychological features ‘inside’ an actor, such as desires and beliefs, influence the outcome. The last (micro-macro) describes how several individuals act together to create a collective outcome. This typology has, however, been criticized and it is clearly simplified. Mayntz (2004) has, for example, pointed out that structural factors can clearly influence the micro-macro link.

Hence, causal mechanisms involve a micro perspective. Several scholars (Brady and Collier eds. 2004: ch. 13; Gerring 2005, 2007a, 2010; Hedström and Swedberg eds. 1998: ch.1; Mahoney 2001) argue that leverage on causal mechanisms is improved if a micro approach is applied, making it possible to ‘open the black box’. Identifying the mechanisms makes it possible not only to find out if X and Y are connected but also how they are related, creating a ‘complete explanation’ (Gerring 2010) or ‘a fully satisfactory social scientific explanation’ (Hedström and Ylikoski

2010: 54). Isolated, however, both macro and micro theory have substantial deficits. Even if the first can describe relations based on structural variables in society, it cannot inform us about the mechanisms that influence the dependent variable, since this in the end must be related to a certain actor or groups of them and their behavior. Micro theory has the opposite problem, with difficulties in linking actors-oriented explanations to structures in society, and also in reaching universal explanations (Peters 1998: ch. 5). As we will see, these problems multiply when it comes to empirically testing or developing macro or micro theory.

Figure 2

Using the logic derived from the aforementioned definition of theory one major implication seems to be necessary. Social theory needs to span over both macro and micro perspectives (Coppedge 1999: 474) otherwise it is incomplete. This is what Gerring refers to when talking about creating larger theoretical frameworks (2005: 180). Having established this idea, I now turn to two examples of central theories in comparative social science to examine how it has been followed.

With the seminal work of initially Lerner (1958) and then Lipset (1959) what is known as the *modernization theory* became the dominating approach in the research trying to explain democracy during the 1960s. The hypothesis of the theory stipulates a positive relation between socioeconomic development and democracy (Lipset 1959: 75). Empirical studies in this tradition, trying to establish the *explanans* for democracy, have logically focused on structural variables external to the political system. More specifically, both the independent and dependent variables in empirical studies have been positioned at the macro level with nation states as the studied observations (e.g. Acemoglu et al. 2009; Barro 1999; Boix and Stokes 2003; Burkhart

and Lewis-Beck 1994; Hadenius 1992; Przeworski et al. 2000) and considerable evidence for the initial hypotheses resulted from these studies. Thus, when it comes to macro associations as given by the initial hypothesis the explanatory power has carefully and repeatedly been evaluated. However, parallel to this development the causal mechanisms have been theorized upon (e.g. Dahl 1971; Diamond 1992), scholars stating that the positive effects of economic development and a lack of absolute poverty change citizens' possibilities and will to participate in politics. This can be described as a dialectic process, where macro characteristics influence the behavior of citizens, which then leads to collectivistic and structural changes in political culture and civil society favorable for democracy. However, even if theoretical descriptions exist there have been few attempts to empirically test the causal mechanisms. This example of how macro and micro theory are integrated in one theoretical framework goes to the extreme, from very general statements to a prediction of individual behavior and thereby meets the definition of social theory. An alternative approach has been described by Przeworski and Teune (1970: ch. 4) in their hierarchical separation between explanatory variables significant in within-systems and relevant variables that are different between systems. Such models create an order where within-systems' variables can be significant only if the right conditions in the system are present. On a structural level, the modernization theory has such conditions. We can find systematic exceptions to the positive relationship between economic development and democracy (Aslaksen 2010; Barro 1999; Ross 2001), where economic success based on oil and mineral assets does not promote democracy. Przeworski and Teune's approach certainly stretches over vertical variations, though without addressing the social mechanisms found in within-case

analyses. An alternative approach is suggested by Falleti and Lynch (2009) who, on the topic of causal mechanisms, emphasize the importance of several structural layers.

Another major theory that also incorporates macro and micro perspectives is the *dependency theory*.⁵ Often described as the opposite of modernization theory, this approach presents, among other things, an alternative explanation of democracy. The structural dimension of the dependency theory is maximally aggregated with a focus on international relations as determinants of democracy. Building on a conception of the world where states are divided into belonging either to the core or to the periphery, the central argument is that poor countries from the Third World are systematically exploited by rich western countries (Wallerstein 1974). The relation to the national structure has been elaborated upon by Chirot, one of the leading advocates (1986: 97):

Internal class, structures or the distribution of power and wealth within particular societies are related to the international distribution of power and wealth between societies. Class structures in core, semiperipheral, and peripheral societies tend to be distinct from one another, particularly in core and peripheral societies.

On a political level dependency is negatively related to states' sovereignty and autonomy, creating negative spirals for weak states and the opposite for the core countries. Focusing on class stratification, the control from core states makes the working class in the peripheral societies more exploited and more dependent on their masters than in less commercialized times (Chirot 1986: ch. 5; Wallerstein 1974: ch. 7). These aggregated explanations can be linked to micro approaches (Bollen 1983; Chirot 1986: ch. 5; Edelman and Haugerud 2005: ch. 5). Driven by a raw capitalism, investors from core countries will try to maximize their profit. This demands

⁵ Dependency theory is an interdisciplinary paradigm which originated from Central and Eastern European economists. In this article I will use this theory in the tradition of comparative studies.

collaboration with local elites in the peripheral countries, creating an unholy alliance with no interest in supporting democracy. Associated with this situation is the lack of a strong middle class in these dependent societies which has, since the time of Aristotle (2000), been one of the major elements supportive of democracy.

Contemporary perspectives and empirical results that examine if the position in the world system is the crucial determinant for the level of democracy have, however, proved to be ambiguous (Bollen 1983; Bollen and Jackman 1985; Gasiorowski 1988; Gnosh 2001; Kaufman et al. 1975). Integrated, this theoretical construction represents the characterization of universality and causality that social theory represents.

Summing up, these two theories in social science are proved to integrate the macro and micro perspectives, combining both explanations based on an ontological perspective of integrating structure and agent.⁶ Further, these two pairs of often separated concepts are highly related to one another and to a more applied analytical pair of concept already discussed, namely the distinction between correlation and causal mechanisms. The three dimensions are shown in figure 3. A distinction between correlation and causal mechanisms (Hedström and Swedberg eds. 1998: ch. 1; Mahoney 2001) allows stressing of the different values of the technique of analysis. Elaborating upon this dichotomy results in the same decomposition that figure 2 describes concerning theory. In other words, borrowing the arguments from Gerring (2005: 165-166) and Mahoney (2001: 582), correlation refers to covariational patterns between X and Y without specifying what might link them together, while causal mechanisms refer to the threads that connect *explanans* with *explanandum*. Since I

⁶ Concerning the separation between structure and agency, its distinction from macro and micro theories or the attempts to integrate structure and agency, this is a tradition that has mainly been carried out in European sociology. As a consequence of an integrated theoretical framework, structure and agency also need to be viewed holistically. For some of the contributions to such an approach see: Archer (1988), Bourdieu (1998), and Giddens (1984).

have argued that social theory should include both elements the distinction between these two analytical perspectives is highly problematic. I thereby join the group of scholars (Gerring 2005: 191; Mahoney 2001: 582, 2008) who have emphasized the importance of simultaneous studies of correlational relationships and causal mechanisms. Returning to figure 3, the consequences of this view on social theory leads to a holistic framework where both the ontological distinction between structure and agency and the separation between correlation and causation can be integrated. I have exemplified with theories that incorporate this wide span and will continue with a discussing of empirical approaches that can either test the construction of such theories or result in their construction

Figure 3

4. Empirical focus

Building on this discussion of social theory, my claim for the empirical focus on research in comparative politics should be quite obvious. Irrespective of whether the approach is deductive or inductive, research in this field needs to contribute to theory. With the given definition of theory I plead for empirical studies that can simultaneously address questions on both covariation and causation. Consequently, research in comparative politics needs to rest on data that cover both micro and macro perspectives, reflecting both structure and agency. Such a statement can be regarded as quite bald; however it is sad that it has been forgotten that this is exactly what was stated by Przeworski and Teune 40 years ago (1970: 74) and that this was later stressed by Coppedge (1999: 474). Thus, setting this standard is necessary for creating the possibilities for unified theoretical contributions. More precisely, this means that data are not only, as in traditional data triangulation, collected from different sources,

but that they also reflect different analytical levels. Sadly enough, much of the most important research in comparative politics consists of examples of macro-level association (Hedström and Ylikoski 2010), neglecting empirical data on the micro level that can help us understand what constitutes the identified association and thereby examples of unsatisfactory contributions to theory.

How the interaction of macro and micro perspectives is best designed is of course based on the purpose and the data. We can, however, notice some alternatives. First of all we need to describe the possibilities arising from good data. The fact that it is often possible to either disaggregate data (macro – micro) or aggregate data (micro – macro) creates appropriate conditions for designing an integrated approach. By doing this, hopefully Weber's (1949) perspective on the need to break down aggregate correlations to patterns of individual actions can be fulfilled. Combining macro and micro data provides several advantages. It creates possibilities for testing unified theory and also strengthens the certainty about the results (King et al. 1994: ch. 1; Peters 1998 46). Relevant variables from aggregated levels can be applied when specifying the causal framework. Analogous to this, important identified parts from the causal model can be lifted up to macro analyses. Although hierarchically ordered statistical data can be valuable regarding the solution of identifying causation they still represent aggregate of data, from macro or micro levels, and must thus be complemented with the within-case analyses since their advantage is to expose the 'black box' and identify causal mechanisms (Gerring 2004, 2007b; Mahony 2007; Seawright and Gerring 2008).

A multilevel empirical design leads, however, to an important problem regarding validity. Imagine that the same social phenomenon is to be studied and operationalized at different analytical levels, which I have proved to be necessary for

good social science. There are then two strategies to achieve construct validity (the congruence between the theoretical understanding of a concept and its definition) and handle conceptual stretching, i.e. risking that a concept is stretched beyond recognition (Sartori 1970). First of all, the researcher can develop *different definitions* for the dependent variable on the different analytical levels with careful consideration of the balance between intension (characteristics constituting a concept) and extension (referents to which a concept applies). This approach causes no problem with conceptual stretching, but it does cause inconsistency in the 'level above', what Adcock and Collier (2001) describe as the relation between the background concept and the systematized concept. In other words, is it possible to argue for *different* definitions of the dependent variable derived from a *unified* theoretical framework? Hence, a better alternative is to develop a *priority order* (Lidén, 2011) where the different properties of a concept's definition are ordered. This approach is implied but not elaborated upon by Sartori (1984) under the caption 'Organizing the intension'. Applying Sartori's rule leads to an inventory of existing literature regarding the concept in question, organizing these definitions, and finally creating a matrix that organizes the characteristics and properties constituting the concept. Working with a multilevel empirical design will, however, mean that these characteristics, making up the intension of the concept, need to be ordered in priority. This will lead to a conceptual framework where macro research, reflecting a high level of abstraction, only permits the core characteristics and properties from the priority order to constitute the definition in use and then consequently the operationalization. Correspondingly, research on a micro level means higher intension and allows the researcher to include all of the properties initially given. This approach can only be based on concepts that have a substantial core of defining attributes and

that can also be ordered (see: Collier and Mahon 1993) and where the characteristics and properties constituting the concept are in the form of necessary and sufficient conditions (Goertz 2006).

In summing up the empirical focus for a comparative research two aspects especially need to be stressed. First of all and most central, the examination or creation of theory in social science needs to be based on data that span over both macro and micro perspectives, making it possible to establish universal explanations as well as causal mechanisms. Second, to be able to provide for construct validity in a multilevel empirical design, two alternatives exist where the construction of a priority order for the dependent variable is, if possible, to be preferred. We will bear these two aspects in mind when we continue with a discussion of the choices of method.

5. The question of method

Earlier I argued that the actual choice of method should be described as a natural process in which the best method(s) in relation to the purpose should be chosen. In many situations the use of multiple methods, known as *mixed methods*, is shown to be the best approach when considering the ambition of testing or creating social theory. In the contemporary discussion of social inquiry, mixed methods is described as the pragmatic paradigm (Hanson 2008; Morgan 2007; Onwuegbuzie and Leech 2005) where attention is brought back to design and methodological concerns, leaving the earlier notion of incompatibility (e.g. Mahoney and Goertz 2006; Sale et al. 2002) aside. However, the concept of mixed methods is not static, and as Leech and Onwuegbuzie (2009) have argued it can be nuanced by addressing the actual degree of mixed design, the time aspect, and the possible bias toward one of the included perspectives. With examples from three different themes I will now discuss how different techniques can be introduced to create an integrated framework.

The first discussion will be based on what is called a ‘nested analysis’ (Lieberman 2005) where quantitative macro analyses are complemented with within-case analyses (e.g. Coppedge 2001; Lidén 2011). Beginning with a statistical or comparative analysis of quantitative data, correlations between the phenomenon of interest and explaining variables are identified. Lieberman then suggests two types of case studies, either those which can contribute to a better specified quantitative model or, if no such problem exists, those which give a more holistic contribution to theory. Hence, combining analyses of between-observation and within-cases gives possibilities to different levels of analysis and provides opportunities both to establish relations between variables and to explain how they, in the studied case(s), are related (Gerring 2005; Lieberman 2007: 442). The crucial step from quantitative to qualitative analysis is currently a widely discussed subject (e.g. Gerring 2004, 2007b; Lieberman 2005; Mahoney 2007; Seawright and Gerring 2008). All in all, the case studies’ contribution to theory is essential in this type of framework, with regard to either developing or testing theory. Briefly, we should also discuss the different techniques that are used in the within-case analyses, especially those which are used to study causal mechanisms. Techniques such as process tracing and path dependency (Brady and Collier eds. 2004: ch. 7; Gerring 2007b; King et al. 1994; Mahoney 2010) as well as funnel and eclectic strategies (Mahoney and Snyder, 1999) appear to be the main approaches of leverage for causal inference (Brady and Collier eds. 2004). In conclusion, the main advantage of a nested analysis is the fact that it can create a unified framework for causality including relevant explanations from different positions in time and space.

On the perspective of multiple causality Ragin’s (1987, 2000) Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA) based on Boolean algebra and later supplemented with

fuzzy sets has had considerable relevance for social inquiries. This technique works with necessary and sufficient conditions, quite a few observations, and many explanatory variables, and tries to identify how combinations of variables influence the outcome. This case-oriented research can be an effective way of identifying more complex relations between variables, especially if it is expanded to include cases from different subsystems, as suggested by Denk (2010), and focuses on multiple causal paths and contextual situations (Aus 2009). It offers, though, no way of approaching causal mechanisms (Seawright, 2004) and must therefore be complemented with within-case studies to contribute adequately to theory. Possible approaches, presented by Mahoney (2008, 2010), show that established causal mechanisms inside a certain case can be lifted up to be examined at an aggregated level, working with a special combination of sufficient and necessary conditions. Correspondingly, findings about relations between observations at an aggregated level can be of importance when theorizing and examining complex causality.

Finally, mixed methods can be used in different phases in the research process (Brannen 2005) thereby giving different advantages from the idea of an integrated framework. Concerning concepts, Coppedge (1999) has outlined a strategy for transferring the advantages of 'thick' concepts in qualitative research to the more quantitative methods. An integrated approach can also be used when it comes to letting aggregated data provide contextual information for qualitative analysis. Both Tarrow (2004) and Brannan (2005) show how this way of doing research can give meaning to statistical correlations. The essential core in several of these arguments is a plea for method triangulation (Brady and Collier eds. 2004: ch. 10). In relation to this, the statistical alternative of multilevel analysis should be mentioned. This appealing method can combine macro and micro data, thereby shaping better

possibilities for the understanding of causality (Peters 1998) but it lacks the narrow perspective that allows scientists to enter the black box.

6. Conclusions

In relation to the ordinary way of carrying out research in comparative politics, the view of theory that I have given must result in transformations regarding method and collection of data. These two activities must be based on an integrated perspective where both macro and micro data are the foundation for different types of method. With this approach the establishment of both covariations and causal mechanisms can be addressed and external and internal validity reached. Clarity and awareness of the perspective of theory have a great potential to improve research in comparative politics.

The main problem, is though, how inference regarding causal mechanisms should be looked upon. Since such an examination needs within-case analysis, generalization is clearly limited. Drawing on Gerring (2010) I agree with the fact that good explanations of causal mechanisms connecting X with Y are of theoretical interest and thereby contribute to the cumulative processes of an understanding of the social world. Finally, it is not hard to agree with Tarrow (2004: 179), who states that qualitative analyses need to be based on a *systematized* approach. However, a more neglected question is whether the techniques and alternatives for combining different analytical levels and different methods in an integrated framework are *systematized* and thereby contribute to social theory.

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Figure 1 The research process

<i>Purpose</i>	<i>Method</i>	<i>Theory</i>	<i>Empirical study</i>	<i>Contribution</i>
Research questions	Deduction: <ul style="list-style-type: none">•Statistical method•Comparative method	Macro theory	•Macro research •Meso research •Micro research	Revision of macro theory
		Micro theory		Revision of micro theory
	Induction: <ul style="list-style-type: none">•Statistical method•Comparative method		•Macro research •Meso research •Micro research	Creation of macro theory
				Creation of micro theory

Figure 2 Covariations and mechanisms in relation to theory

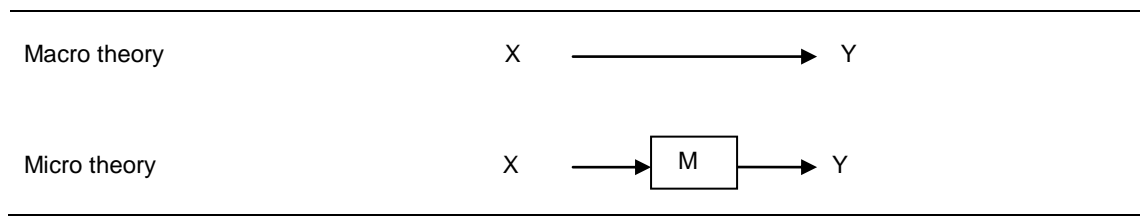


Figure 3 Framework of social theory

Ontological departure	Theory	Form of analysis
Structure	Macro	Correlation
	↕	
Agency	Micro	Causation

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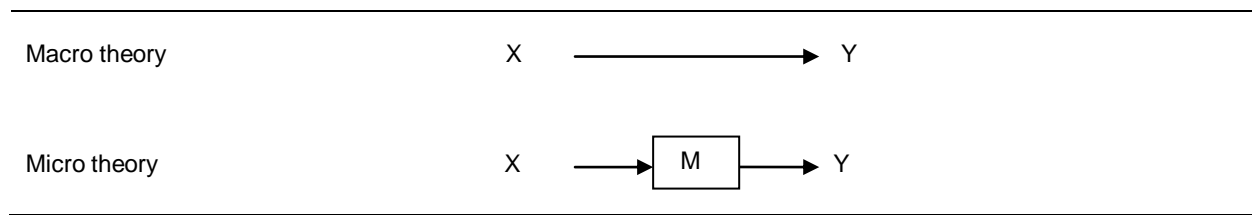


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