

COMPARATIVE-HISTORICAL METHODS BY MATTHEW LANGE

Comparative-Historical Methods, Matthew Lange. London: Sage, 2013. £25.99. ISBN: 97818492062.

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Books using comparative-historical methods won a quarter of the American Sociological Association's awards for best book of the year between 1986 and 2010. Yet although there is a fairly extensive literature on comparative-historical methods, it consists mainly of articles - articles, moreover, that often defend the superiority of one method of comparison over another. Matthew Lange's study is the first book-length overview of the different methods of doing comparative history, and it is particularly welcome for its insistence that there is no one way of doing comparative history and that eclecticism and the combination of different methodologies are things to be valued. Despite its discussion of a broad range of methodologies and detailed explanation of technical terms, however, it is doubtful that the book will serve the needs of its target audience: undergraduates in social sciences. The blurb claims that the book is written with 'great clarity', but clarity is a quality that comes and goes through the text. There is a lucid account of Boolean comparison, popularized by Charles Ragin, that uses algebraic analysis of configurations of causal variables to reveal how they are related to the dependent variable in a set of cases, thereby shedding light on the necessary and sufficient causes of a particular outcome. By contrast, Lange's discussion of methodological synergy is barely intelligible. The intractability of the text is not only a matter of style: it is a consequence of the author's fondness for discussing methods in terms of complex and highly abstract typologies. He does offer brief discussions of key works of comparative historical sociology from Moore (1966) and Skopel (1979), to more recent writers such as Wickham-Crowley (1993) and Rueschemeyer, Stephens and Stephens (1991), but more could have been done to explore the ways in which these writers set about constructing, conceptualizing and researching the problems they wish to investigate. Instead, Lange is more concerned to show how their methods fit his own typologies.

Lange convincingly argues that the dominant form of comparative history rests on 'within-case methods', i.e. on the in-depth study of a single case, and he proceeds to differentiate primary and secondary 'within-case' methods. But his compulsion to typologize obscures as much as it illuminates. Primary methods include all the typical methods of the historian, notably causal narrative, supplemented by network analysis GIS, ethnographic, linguistic, or archaeological methods. Additional primary methods include 'process tracing' and 'pattern matching', the latter concerned with testing theory against case-studies. Yet. These distinctions do not seem to be as securely grounded as the author maintains. To take one example: 'process tracing' is defined as focusing on the mechanisms that link elements in a causal sequence and is said to differ substantially from causal narrative, since it purportedly focuses on a single determinant or analyses a single segment of a causal sequence, whereas causal narrative focuses on several determinants and usually analyses longer causal chains (50). Yet Lange concedes that both causal analysis and process tracing depend on a pre-existing narrative crafted by the historian, and it seems doubtful that such narratives lend themselves easily to establishing sharp differences between causal determinants and mere linking mechanisms.

Lange's argument rests on a highly reductive understanding of what historians actually do. Indeed, comparative-historical methods turn out to have little relevance to practicing historians: they are exclusively the preserve of sociologists and political scientists. Historical methods, he contends, are 'limited to particular phenomena in particular places at particular

times. As a consequence, they are ill-suited to nomothetic explanations' (13). And despite his recognition of the dependence of the historical social scientist on the 'within-case' study and on causal narrative - areas in which historians have an excellent track record - Lange insists that historical narrative differs from causal narrative and process tracing 'because it does not explore the causes of phenomena' (56), a claim that would surprise any historian. There is only a perfunctory reference to the seminal contributions to comparative historical methodology made by Marc Bloch or Fernand Braudel, and none at all to recent lively debates – often in German, it is true – between the advocates of comparative history and those of *histoire croisée* (*gekreuzte Geschichte*), 'cultural transfer', or transnational history. These debates engage with many of the methodological issues discussed in the book and often in a much less etiolated fashion. Lange's lack of interest in what historians actually do is linked to his very narrow conception of what comparative history is. In his view, it is the style of history concerned with what Charles Tilly called 'big structures, large processes, huge comparisons', i.e. with constructing models of social and political change, with multivariate generalization, or with macro-developmental theorizing. Many historians today work on very large canvases, and by no means all in the mould advocated by Lange. One thinks of Scheidel (2009), Pomeranz (2001), Wong (1997), Armitage & Subrahmanyam (2010), Klooster (2009) and Burbank & Cooper (2009), as representing a very diverse range of work. And though not all these scholars write in an explicitly comparative mode, all draw upon 'comparative-historical methods'. And this is to pay no attention to a large body of comparative history that operates on smaller chronological and geographical scales or to comparative work that is concerned with culture and agency than with structural change.

There is no doubt that the type of historical and political sociology that Lange discusses has been enormously stimulating for more mainstream historians, whether they work comparatively or not, forcing them to think rigorously about their explanations, to ask new questions and to widen their perspectives. Nevertheless, in view of Lange's rather condescending attitude to mainstream historical writing, it is worth pointing to some of the limitations of the comparative-historical methods he advocates. As he briefly acknowledges, such methods depend heavily on the secondary work of historians, so that their elegant models are usually interpretations of other historians' interpretations. And where historiography advances quickly, such models quickly become superannuated (a good instance would be Theda Skocpol's contrast between a bureaucratic post-revolutionary state in the Soviet Union and the supposedly non-bureaucratic state in Maoist China: a contrast that depended entirely on a historiography of China in the 1970s that took too many Maoist claims at face value). This dependence on historiography is partially recognized at a conceptual level by Lange when he concedes that the causal analysis of the social scientist depends on the pre-existing causal narratives of the historians, which he dismisses as purely 'descriptive'. However, even if this were a fair charge, it calls into question the epistemological assumptions of the type of social-science history he advocates, since this is premised on a strong form of causal determinism and on a strong belief in the independent, objectively knowable reality of the past. If we recognize, as Lange appears to do, that the causes we adduce to explain historical events are bound up with the narratives we write, then any assumption that causes and effects exist 'out there' in the past becomes problematic. It is true that many mainstream historians also subscribe to these epistemological assumptions, but in general the pressure to wrestle with the interplay of structure and agency, with issues of culture and meaning, with the complex determinations of historical context, with issues of timing and conjuncture, forces them to recognize the constructed nature of historical research and the complexities of putting together a historical narrative: something that practitioners of harder forms of social-science history need to address more than Lange recognizes.