

**COMPARATIVE-HISTORICAL ANALYSIS:  
GENERALIZING PAST THE PAST**

James Mahoney  
Northwestern University  
Departments of Political Science and Sociology  
Evanston, IL 60208  
James-Mahoney@northwestern.edu

**Paper to be presented at ASA Mini-Conference: Comparing Past and Present,  
Berkeley, CA, August 12, 2009**

**This is a rough draft composed of tentative arguments. Comments welcome,  
including examples from your own work.**

## COMPARATIVE-HISTORICAL ANALYSIS: GENERALIZING PAST THE PAST

James Mahoney  
Northwestern University

Especially in the conclusions of their books, comparative-historical analysts may explore whether past events and processes have something to teach us about the future. For example, Theda Skocpol ends *Protecting Mothers and Soldiers* by asking about lessons from the materialist phase of social policymaking in the United States; Michael Mann's conclusion to the *The Dark Side of Democracy* focuses on combating ethnic cleansing in the twenty-first century; and Jeff Goodwin closes his book *No Other Way Out* by arguing that the age of revolution he analyzes is now probably over. As a group, I think it is safe to say, we comparative-historical analysts believe our findings often provide insights that are useful for thinking about what might (or should) happen in the times to come.

Deriving lessons for the future based on the past requires making *generalizations* from cases about which we know something to cases that do not yet exist. It requires, in other words, that comparative-historical analysts generalize "past the past." There is, of course, a methodological literature focused on how comparative-historical analysts make generalizations about cases located at different points in time (something that is required in all past-present comparisons). One challenge, for example, involves taking into consideration the various ways in which earlier cases influence later cases. Because of this case-to-case influence, causal patterns often cannot be fully homogenous across different time periods. Another challenge involves recognizing the influence of world-historical time. By "world-historical time," I refer to macro contextual variables such as

the nature of technology and reigning ideological models, which vary over time and shape what is possible. These differences, too, put limits on the extent to which causal patterns can be generalized across time.

In this paper, I want to focus on extending generalizations from past cases to the future. In particular, I want to explore whether comparative-historical analysts can use their work as a basis for making *predictions*. I view predictions as inherently future-oriented; they are statements about the future. Bell and Olick (1989: 116) offer a good definition: “A prediction is a statement about the expected occurrence of some future event, outcome, state, or process.” A growing body of work – sometimes referred to as “future studies” – is centrally concerned with prediction defined in this way (see Bell 2008). A basic purpose of this paper is to explore whether (and how) comparative-historical analysis has anything to add to future studies and work explicitly concerned with prediction.<sup>1</sup>

The idea of using social science to try to predict the future is, of course, not without controversy. Some scholars, in fact, may believe that efforts to predict the future have quite undesirable political implications. At the root of this concern is the belief that the social sciences cannot make accurate predictions about the future. For some, this inability to predict reflects the current poor state of social science theory and analysis; for others, the social world is itself so fraught with contingency and complexity that prediction is inherently impossible. Either way, the argument goes, the effort at predicting makes the world appear more rigid, more law-like, and less open than it really is. In turn, by making the world appear rigid and law-like, the scholar reifies social

---

<sup>1</sup> Although I do not explore it here, comparative-historical analysis can also be used to derive normative and moral lessons for the future. That is, researchers in this genre can use their findings to address the question: what *should* happen in the future?

structures and fails to see possibilities for transformation that really do exist. Prediction and futures studies may thus be viewed as inherently an inherently conservative project with a deep pro-status quo bias.

Yet I would argue these concerns are greatly overstated. First, I believe that many or most social science predictions are *conditional predictions* – that is, predictions that assert that an outcome will occur if some other things happen first. As a result, most predictions are exploring how to *change* the world in a humanly desirable way. The purpose of the prediction is to bring about a desirable outcome or avoid an undesirable outcome. Second, future-oriented predictions are inherent to human action and human thinking. To assert that social scientists should not entertain any predictions about the future is to make the social sciences politically irrelevant. Indeed: “the only really useful knowledge in making our way in the world is knowledge of the future. The past is over and done with. It is a closed book. Although we can change our ideas about the past and can rewrite history, the past itself does not change. The only thing we can influence by our actions is the future. The future is open” (Bell and Olick 1989: 126).

Third, predictions are really just a way of exploring how (and if) causal findings about the past can be generalized beyond the past. Most comparative-historical researchers already believe in the possibility of causal generalization across cases located at different times (within constraints). Given this, it does not seem unreasonable to ask if generalizations can sometimes be extended to future cases.<sup>2</sup> If the answer is affirmative, it follows that prediction is at least possible. Of course, if one rejects out of hand the very idea of causal generalization across time, then one will surely also believe that this

---

<sup>2</sup> Interestingly enough, Karl Popper (1957) staunchly argued against this kind of prediction. Thus, one of the best known mid-20<sup>th</sup> century positivists is also a champion of the view that unconditional prediction is absolutely inappropriate for the social sciences.

exercise is fruitless. But, as I say, I think most comparative and historical researchers are committed to the idea of *bounded* causal generalizations for cases situated at different points in history. And as we shall see, *the extent to which* generalizations are bounded (which can vary from study to study) has important implications for what the past can tell us about the future.

Let me note upfront, however, one key reason why it is harder to generalize past the past than it is to generalize across cases located at different points in the past (i.e., past-past generalizations). When all cases are in the past, we know (or at least in principle might know) the values of relevant contextual variables; we can judge whether “context” affects causal patterns because we have some knowledge of this context. But when we generalize to the future, we know less about the values of contextual variables. As a result, we cannot be certain that, in the new and unknown future context, our causal arguments will work in the same way. If for only this reason, future-oriented generalizations may have a higher degree of uncertainty than generalizations made for cases in the past (even if those past cases are located at very different points in history).

Since predictions raise distinctive methodological issues, a few initial words about them seem in order.

## **TYPES OF PREDICTIONS**

Predictions about the future take different forms and can be compared across different dimensions (see Bell 1964; Bell 2008). For one thing, as already noted, a prediction can be conditional or unconditional. A conditional prediction asserts that something in the future will happen *if* certain relevant conditions are met. The prediction

may not tell us about the likelihood of the relevant conditions being met, only that if they are, then something will or should follow. Conditional predictions allow researchers to try to specify the conditions that would bring about desirable outcomes. An unconditional prediction, by contrast, asserts that something *is going to happen* in the future given present conditions in the universe. These predictions are what Popper (1957) pejoratively calls “historical prophecies.” Like Popper, Tilly (1995) also feels that unconditional predictions are not possible; Collins (1995), on the other hand, believes that they have been successfully carried out (Collins says he predicted the fall of the USSR). It is worth noting that the distinction between conditional and unconditional predictions is easily blurred: conditional predictions may become unconditional predictions when their stipulated conditions are met.

Second, the “outcome” that is predicted to occur in the future may differ quite a lot (Portes 1995). In some cases, this outcome may be a specific event (e.g., a revolution) perhaps in a particular case (e.g., a revolution in Guatemala) and perhaps at a certain time (e.g., a revolution in Guatemala during the next five years). Yet it need not be. The outcome could also be a general trend (e.g., increasing inequality) that applies *on average* to a broad range of cases or individuals across a less than fully specified interval of time. Thus, the specificity of the outcome, the range or percentage of cases to which the outcome applies, and timing of the outcome can all vary from prediction to prediction. Moreover, predictions need not be mainly about “outcomes” at all. Rather, a prediction may assert that if some outcome does happen (without implying that it will), its occurrence will be at least in part the result of some particular cause. For example, consider the following prediction: if the economy improves, it will be in no small part

because of Obama's stimulus package. This is a conditional prediction more about a causal process than an outcome.

Third, the determinacy of the prediction can vary. In some cases, the researcher will make a deterministic prediction, which takes the form of asserting that some outcome will happen or will not happen (perhaps if certain other conditions are first met, in the case of a deterministic conditional prediction). In other cases, however, the researcher will couch his or her prediction in probabilistic language, suggesting that that some outcome is, for example, very likely, likely, somewhat likely, or perhaps merely "possible" in the future. Although probabilistic predictions may be the norm, deterministic predictions are usually preferable.<sup>3</sup>

### **Summary of Argument**

My (tentative) argument for the rest of the paper is roughly as follows (see figure 1 at the back). First, if comparative-historical researchers are going to generalize past the past (i.e., generalize to the future), their theories must propose causes that are applicable and relevant to present times. When researchers conceptualize causal factors so historically that they cannot be applied to the present, they face major constraints generalizing beyond the past. So one key issue concerns how causal factors are conceptualized, and whether they have relevance in present times (or future times).

Second, assuming that causal factors can be related to the present, the next consideration is whether the outcome under investigation can (hypothetically) occur in the future. Some outcomes are so historically specific that they cannot even

---

<sup>3</sup> This is true insofar as certainty is preferable to uncertainty (which it may not always be).

hypothetically occur again. When the outcomes analyzed in a comparative-historical study apply only to the past, informed prediction is constrained.

Third, if both the causes and outcomes of a comparative-historical argument are applicable to the present, then various forms of prediction are at least possible. Conditional prediction seems especially likely to be pursued when there are constraints in the extent to which the “scope” of a comparative historical argument can be extended to present times. Although the concepts used for causes and outcome are applicable to present times, the researcher may believe that the present “context” is so different that issues of causal heterogeneity prohibit a mechanical causal generalization. The researcher consequently makes a conditional prediction -- for example, he or she asserts that causal findings from the study will hold up provided that some other events establish conditions similar to those stipulated in the argument’s scope statement.

The stronger mode of unconditional prediction can be pursued if the researcher believes that the scope of his or her argument at least partially applies to the present. When this is true, and when causes and outcome are also applicable to the present, unconditional prediction seems to be possible. These predictions can still vary in the type of anticipated outcome, ranging from a highly specific event (e.g., a revolution at certain time and place) to a general process (e.g., increasing global inequality across nations). And they may be couched in probabilistic language that, among other things, protects the researcher if the prediction does not come to pass.

Finally, prediction might be combined with influence (or “control,” if you must) under certain special circumstances. For comparative-historical findings to be used effectively in this way, the requirements for unconditional prediction must be met, plus

something more: the causes of the comparative-historical argument must be subject to manipulation and possibly also under the control of the researcher. In this case, the researcher could predict what will happen based on his or her anticipated manipulations.

In the rest of this paper, I am going to try to flesh out these ideas, using comparative-historical works as my examples. Please let me know if you are aware of other good examples (including from your own work). All of this is tentative. Figure 1 provides an overview of the argument and a guide to the discussion.

-----  
Figure 1 about here  
-----

## **CONSTRAINED GENERALIZATION**

I begin by considering a set of circumstances that will generate a reluctance to generalize past the past: the causal argument itself prohibits (or at least deeply constrains) any future-oriented projections. These difficulties are related to the generality of concepts, something which has important implications for any kind of causal generalization.

### **Extending Past Causes to the Present and Future**

In order to generalize their causal findings to the future, comparative-historical analysts seemingly must study causes<sup>4</sup> that have some relevance to the future. By “have some relevance,” I mean simply that it must be hypothetically possible for the causes to exist in the present or future. The causes are *irrelevant* to the future if they cannot exist

---

<sup>4</sup> A “cause” or “causal factor” can be thought of as a value or particular range of values on a variable.

again. Under these circumstances, the ability of the analyst to generalize his or her causal findings beyond the past is constrained.

Whether causes can be applied to future depends on the generality of the concepts underlying them. Like all variables used in explanation, causes are just concepts that fall at different levels of generality (on conceptual generality see Goertz 2006; Collier and Gerring 2008). Comparative-historical researchers employ causes at many different levels. Some causes are quite general, such as “relative deprivation” and “legitimacy,” whereas others are quite specific, such as “the Terror” and “the Black Plague.” The same author may combine both general and specific causes. And highly specific causal factors sometimes may be conceived as instances of a more general category (e.g., the Terror might be seen as an instance of “repression” and the Black Plague as an instance of an “epidemic”).

If all of the causal concepts in an explanation are irrelevant to the future, it is hard to see how the researcher can generalize findings. Modes of path-dependent explanation, for example, may be hard to generalize to the future. These explanations often call attention to historically specific causal factors that are unexpected, random, or small events in order to explain outcomes that apply to individual times and places. As Jack Goldstone notes, “a system that exhibits path dependency is one in which outcomes are related stochastically to initial conditions” (1998: 834). In these systems, a “unique outcome” is “produced by some contingent conditions or choices that separated the outcome in that particular system from outcomes in other systems that started out from similar conditions” (p. 843). The key causal factors -- the “contingent conditions or

choices” of which Goldstone writes -- cannot be generalized to the present and future almost by definition.

Goldstone’s (1998; forthcoming) own path-dependent argument about the causes of the Industrial Revolution in England provides a substantive example. He treats this outcome as a “happy chance,” the result of a series of happenstances that were distinctive to England. Especially crucial was the invention of the first steam engine, which he sees as an accidental development stemming from need of miners to find a way to remove ground water from mine shafts (which in turn was a product of England’s limited forest area, which promoted a heavy reliance on coal for heating, which eventually led to the exhaustion of surface level coal, which fostered the deep digging that filled the mines with water). Once the steam engine was invented, according to Goldstone, a series of other industrial breakthroughs followed quite naturally and then spread to other cases. But the steam engine development itself was a contingent and unique event.

Given that Goldstone views this cause as distinctive to England, it is hard to see how the argument could be *directly* generalized to the future. The key cause -- the invention of the first steam engine -- simply cannot occur again. Nor can many of the circumstances that led up to this cause. It is possible to assert that this cause is an instance of a more general category, such as “technological invention with massive spin-offs.” But Goldstone does not present his argument in this fashion, and it is not clear that he believes that just any technological invention with major spin-offs would have spurred the Industrial Revolution. He prefers to characterize the cause as a one-and-off happening (i.e., as “unique”).

Problems of generalization to contemporary and future cases sometimes arise even when the analyst views key causes as instances or types of a more general category. If the general category itself applies only to the past, then generalization will remain problematic. For instance, if your key cause is the strength of the Church relative to the Crown (e.g., Fulbrook 1983), it may be hard to locate an equivalent in present times. Of course, some categories are borderline – i.e., they partially apply to present, or they apply to the present but only with modifications. My book on *The Legacies of Liberalism: Path Dependence and Political Regimes in Central America* might be an example. As causal factors, I looked at three different types of nineteenth-century liberal reform (what I called radical, reformist, and aborted liberalism). While these patterns themselves cannot be repeated, I argued in the conclusion that broadly similar modes of *neo-liberal* reform still apply to the present context. I then derived lessons (i.e., made conditional predictions) based on this similarity. I predicted that countries that pursued moderately paced market reforms would experience more democratic political outcomes than those countries that pursued either rapid market reforms or no reforms at all.

As long as a reasonable case can be made that causal factors from the past can apply in modified form to the present, some causal generalization to future can take place. To be sure, the *confidence* that one has in such future-oriented generalizations will vary depending on *how well* the concepts can be applied to the present. A basic methodological rule is indeed the following: the confidence with which one can draw lessons from a study of the past varies in proportion with the degree to which one believes the key concepts in the study can be applied to the present. My point for now is

that generalization is deeply constrained when causal factors *do not apply at all* in the present times.

Finally, although I have been talking about the generality of individual causal factors, it is certainly relevant to ask about the generality of packages of causes and overall causal processes. Quite often, comparative-historical scholars are concerned more with causal combinations than with individual causal factors. And they often also focus centrally on causal sequences, where causal factors are located at different temporal positions, under the belief that temporal ordering is of great causal consequence. It may be the case that a study has some individual causes that can be generalized to the future, but the overall causal package or the appropriate sequence of causes cannot. For example, if one sought to generalize Thomas Ertman's argument in *Birth of the Leviathan* about the formation of contrasting kinds of regime-states in Europe, an initial problem would be that some of his causes might apply only to the past, such as the nature of the representative institutions that emerged in the aftermath of the Roman Empire. This problem would be exacerbated by the fact that his argument traces a sequence of causes that cannot be stripped from the early modern historical context that he analyzes. For example, with respect to geopolitical competition, Ertman argues that the critical question was not so much the degree or intensity of military pressure, but rather its timing relative to early-modern state building processes themselves.

An extreme example of a causal process immune to generalization is suggested by chaos theory. Although the dynamics modeled in chaos theory follow a rigid law-like form, they are so complex that it is hard to see how they can be meaningfully used for any kind of future-oriented prediction. They must, instead, be analyzed *post hoc*. To the

extent that some scholars believe that most outcomes in the social sciences are produced through dynamics like those of chaos theory, they will obviously be skeptical of the possibility of past-present comparisons, much less trying to predict outcomes in the future.

### **What Kinds of Generalization Remain?**

Yet even works fraught with contingency like Goldstone's path-dependent explanation of the Industrial Revolution, or those tightly linked to a particular temporal-spatial period such as Ertman's *Birth of the Leviathan*, do not close the door on all forms future-oriented generalization. These works still allow the author to weigh in on many weighty matters of importance to the present. For particularistic studies still often speak to ancient questions in historical sociology: What is the role of agency vs. structure in producing outcomes? Do big outcomes require big causes? Is society fundamentally predicated on conflict or consensus? When and if do individuals act rationally? Does culture matter? Most comparative-historical studies engage some of these classic questions. And the answers to these questions, in turn, can have future-oriented implications. By using historical findings to take sides on longstanding debates, therefore, comparative-historical scholars can address present-day concerns.

I call these kinds of future-oriented generalizations *meta-theoretical lessons*. For example, one meta-theoretical lesson that follows from Goldstone's work is that small accidents can produce momentous outcomes with epochal consequences. This is hardly a trivial lesson, given that much social science assumes the opposite (see Abbott 2001). To take another example, consider Mary Fulbrook's *Piety and Politics: Religion and the Rise of Absolutism in England, Württemberg, and Prussia*. A major lesson here is that

ideas can matter a lot during certain crucial historical moments and that pre-conceived evolutionary schemes must often be rejected (1983: 187-188). Again, when we think about predictions such as those proposed by Fukuyama in *The End of History and the Last Man*, Fulbrook's metatheoretical lesson about the fallacies of evolutionary schemes hardly seems trivial. Ertman's work also raises important meta-theoretical lessons. One of his major findings concerns the important role of powerful local governments in checking monarchs and combating absolutism. He uses this finding to draw the conclusion that the "involvement of a broad segment of the population in the management of its own affairs . . . creates bonds of solidarity and commonalities of interest which, when combined with the material resources of participatory local bodies, allow effective resistance to be mobilized against monocratic designs of statebuilding political leaders" (1997: 324). Extrapolating a little, one can say that Ertman reaches the general conclusion that grassroots democratic participation allows individuals to support their interests.<sup>5</sup> While this conclusion may not be precise enough as qualify as a testable hypothesis, it is meta-theoretical insight of importance.

These kinds of meta-theoretical conclusions are possible because even when causal factors are regarded as unique to a time and place, they still inevitably belong to larger categories. These larger categories may be so general that they do not allow for any specific predictions about events or trends. But they may allow for highly-stylized, "meta-theoretical" predictions, such as the claim that "ideas will matter" in future

---

<sup>5</sup> Interestingly, he also notes that strong central governments are often needed to prevent the concentration of elite power at the local level. These ideas lead him to move toward a full-blown prediction. He predicts that new states with strong local governments *and* a strong central governments will be the areas that develop bureaucratic constitutional state-regimes best able to meet their citizen's needs. In his own words, "local government is in itself not enough to ensure the triumph of bureaucratic constitutionalism. It is only the combination of participatory local government with a strong center equipped with independent capacities of rule that . . . can assure such an outcome: (p. 324).

historical transitions. Thus, not even an inability to transpose causes to the present shuts down all future-oriented generalizations.

### **CAUSAL GENERALIZATION TO THE FUTURE**

In this section, I examine comparative-historical works in which causal arguments are generalized to the present context without major modifications. Here researchers ask more directly whether causal processes will lead to outcomes in the way that they did in the past. How much future-oriented generalization is actually feasible, however, varies depending in part on whether the outcome under investigation can also be extended to the present.

#### **Deriving Theoretical Lessons Relevant to the Future**

Comparative-historical researchers may sometimes conclude that while a given set of causes produced a certain outcome in the past, these same causes cannot produce that same outcome in the future. Nevertheless, the researcher may still use findings about the past as the basis for drawing out theoretical lessons applicable to the present and future. For instance, in *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers*, Skocpol asks about lessons from the materialist phase of U.S. social provision. Among other things, she argues that materialist social policy depended on the ability of early-twentieth-century women to build organizations that encompassed and represented diverse classes, regions, races, and ideologies. Skocpol does not believe that the fledging materialist welfare state of the past could (or should) ever be recreated. But she does believe that theoretical lessons can be drawn from it. She thus concludes her book by calling for feminists to try to create more

encompassing coalitions that reach beyond upper-middle-class, well-educated, white women. These broader coalitions, she argues, would make more likely the creation of strong, universal social programs that could benefit working families in the United States. The implication is that the extent and nature of divisions among U.S. women may shape the degree to which the U.S. welfare state eventually addresses the needs of all families and communities.

What kind of future-oriented projection is Skocpol making here? She is not predicting that any specific outcome will happen. Nor does she quite make a full-blown conditional prediction, in which she asserts that if some conditions are met, then some outcome will follow. Even if the conditions for a broad feminist coalition were to exist, Skocpol's argument does not quite allow for the prediction that more generous social policies would be developed. Her conclusions are rather "theoretical lessons." They are more specific ideas than metatheoretical insights but they still stop short of making predictions. Theoretical lessons are, in effect, conditional predictions that are so probabilistic that the author would not be surprised if the predicted outcome did not happen even if all stipulated conditions were met. In the case of Skocpol, she is quite explicit that, even under the best circumstances, feminist groups could only be one component of the broad coalition required to redirect social provision in the United States.

Theoretical lessons are often made when the outcome in question is a specific occurrence rather than a trend. For a specific occurrence, a probabilistic conditional prediction may provide little predictive leverage. That is, given that the effect of the causal variables is partial and probabilistic, the researcher cannot assert with any

confidence that something specific will happen in any particular case, even if causal variables assume values “favorable” for a given outcome. In short, we may conclude that causal arguments that are quite partial and probabilistic in form do not allow for meaningful pinpoint predictions in specific cases; but they permit more general theoretical lessons. Scholars who believe that all causal arguments in the social sciences must be highly probabilistic will therefore likely reject the idea of making predictions in specific cases and gravitate toward the goal of drawing theoretical lessons for the future.

In addition, the analyst may be drawn to make theoretical lessons without specific predictions when he or she studies an outcome that cannot occur again. Under these conditions, the analyst must try to imagine what new possible outcome would occur if the causes repeated themselves. A common intuition may be that a somewhat similar kind of outcome would occur. For instance, Skocpol argues that if women united more like they did in the past, then social policy might be redirected to help families more, as in the past. Here Skocpol’s fledgling materialist welfare state is converted into generous social policies for working families. Because the two concepts are not quite the same thing, the extent to which prediction is feasible and appropriate is constrained, leading the future-oriented projection to stop at theoretical lessons.

Another example here.

### **Making Conditional Predictions**

A conditional prediction states that some outcome will happen provided that some well defined conditions are met. In comparative-historical research, even scholars skeptical about the possibility of prediction will sometimes propose conditional predictions. For example, Miguel Centeno in *Blood and Debt* expresses skepticism about

deterministic models. Yet he nevertheless makes predictions about the conditions that are necessary for war to enhance nation-building. These conditions include a preexisting administrative core, an elite that sees war as consistent with its interests, and a state leadership that is certain about the definition of the nation (2002: 275-276). If these conditions are not met, then Centeno predicts that wars will *not* help to build coherent nation-states. Conversely, if these conditions are met, then war is at least more likely to contribute to nation building. He makes this conditional prediction by generalizing the patterns he found for Latin America vs. Europe (he considers the Latin American experience to be the more typical pattern).

Another example.

When are conditional predictions likely to be made? I would suggest that they are likely to be made when both the causes and outcomes of a comparative-historical argument are readily applicable to the present. Under these circumstances, the researcher is more likely to ask whether certain causes will produce outcomes as they did in the past. If the researcher does go head and make a prediction, it may be *conditional* (as opposed to unconditional) because he or she believes that some key ingredient is missing or different in the present context. The researcher might then insist that this condition must first be met before a clear prediction can be made.

A perhaps common set of circumstances that leads a researcher to a conditional prediction is when the “scope” of the argument cannot be extended beyond the past (even though the causes and outcome can be extended). Scope refers to the context within which a given causal pattern can be expected to operate. Outside of this context, causal heterogeneity may arise, prohibiting generalization. A conditional prediction might

therefore state that a given outcome cannot occur until the scope conditions of the argument are met. In some cases, conditional predictions will be effectively prohibited because scope conditions cannot be replicated. Here the researcher makes the conditional prediction, but it will never be put to the test, because the stipulated conditions will never be met.

More examples here.

## UNCONDITIONAL PREDICTION AND INFLUENCE

At least some comparative-historical researchers make unconditional predictions; that is, they make predictions about what *is* going to happen in the future, given present conditions. They also sometimes make concrete suggestions about influencing the future through interventions of one kind or another. Let us consider some examples.

### **Prediction without Manipulation**

Most of the unconditional predictions that I have found are more about trends than specific events (see also Portes 1995). Here are five examples:

(1) Writing in 1989, Dreze and Sen predicted that the market-oriented reforms in China (that started in 1979) would have an adverse effect on matters of life and death (e.g., death rate, life expectancy, and infant mortality rate).

In a recent article in the *New York Review of Books*, Sen gives evidence that supports this prediction.

(2) Writing in 1992, Rueschemeyer, Stephens, and Stephens predicted that, “The struggle for gender equality is bound to succeed in the long run . . . the equalizing changes are likely to come slowly . . . [and] will for a large part and for a prolonged time be achieved by political means” (p. 301). They also predict that “the struggles for gender equality will increase women’s political participation over the long run and make it more intense.”

The prediction about overall gender equality still has a long way to go; but women's formal political representation has increased a lot since the time of their writing as they predicted.

(3) Writing in 1992, Charles Tilly predicted that Great Powers will be less engaged in militarizing the Third World in the future. He also specifically predicted the end of the sovereign state system (p. 227).

Tilly's prediction about reduced militarism coming from the Great Powers seems correct so far. It is still too early to weigh in on his prediction about the decline of the state system, though other scholars have made the same prediction – e.g., Wendt 2003 and Wright 2000.

(4) Writing in 2001, Jeff Goodwin predicted that armed revolutionary struggle will decline and that social revolutions will become less common than during the Cold War era (pp. 293-306).

His prediction about social revolutions seems to be correct so far; I am not sure about the prediction about armed revolutionary struggle.

(5) Writing in 2003, Beverly Silver predicted that the trend toward increasing workplace bargaining power will be reversed in the twenty-first century (p. 172).

Impressionistically, this prediction seems correct so far.

How are these predictions possible? What basis do the authors have for making them? In each case, the author makes the prediction in part by considering the likely future effects of causal variables that he or she analyzed for past cases. Interestingly, in most of these predictions, the author argues that the causal variables will not likely assume the same values that produced the outcome of interest in the original study. As a result, the outcome or trend under study is going to be different. Thus, Dreze and Sen believe that China is no longer going to over-perform on matters of life and death because its support-based policies have been abandoned. Goodwin and Silver believe that social revolutions and increasing workplace bargaining power, respectively, are declining because the factors that brought them about in the past no longer apply. Tilly

and Rueschemeyer, Stephens, and Stephens also predict that outcomes in the future will be different from the ones they analyzed.

In these examples, the authors' unconditional prediction seems to require three things. First, in each case, both the causal variables and the outcome have relevance for the future. For example, social revolutions could hypothetically happen in the future, so it is possible and meaningful to make a prediction about them. Second, current conditions in the world speak to and provide information about the causal process analyzed in the study, allowing the analyst to "measure" the values of causal factors in the here and now. Thus, for instance, Dreze and Sen can analyze whether, at the time of their writing, China was adopting those policies that they believe drive over-performance in social development. In other words, they had information about the current value of key causal factors in China. Third, the authors believe that the "context" of the present and future is not so radically different as to outright prohibit prediction. While this context may be different, these differences can be taken into consideration, and they do not outright violate the scope of the theory used to analyze the past.

The extent to which these three requirements are fully met shapes our confidence about the likelihood that predictions will be true. If, for example, the concepts associated with key causal variables are only partially applicable to the present and future, then uncertainty about the prediction is introduced. Likewise, a great deal of uncertainty is introduced if it is unknown how well the present "context" is consistent with the scope of the original theory. The key point is that scholars can make their predictions more *convincing* if they can show that these three requirements are met.

Yet, even if these requirements are fully met, uncertainty will still inevitably exist. For the prediction will still depend on the validity of the findings derived from the past cases. If those findings are wrong, then there is little reason to believe that a prediction based on the same theory will be correct, even if causes and outcome are applicable to the future. In comparative-historical analysis, therefore, the first and foremost challenge of making a convincing prediction about the future is making a convincing causal argument about the past.

Some may feel that the list of requirements for future prediction is so steep that comparative-historical researchers would do better to stick to the goal of trying to explain the past. But the challenges of making valid causal generalizations across cases located at different points in history are already steep. And this does not stop most of us from trying and sometimes, I believe, partially succeeding. To be sure, making valid future-oriented predictions adds another layer of challenge. Yet the main difficulty may still be making the valid generalization for the past cases. Once we have done this, we can check and see if some other requirements are met. If they are, we may well be in a very strong position to make an unconditional prediction.

### **Causal Manipulation**

In our everyday lives, of course, we constantly link prediction *and* influence together. We continuously maneuver in the world using predictions about how our actions will influence outcomes. Yet, the idea of using social science to influence the world raises controversy. Perhaps one conjures up images of the Vienna Circle with its designs at uncovering laws applicable across all times and places, and thereby controlling the social world in technical ways and without reference to human values. Or perhaps

one thinks of the hubris underlying disastrous social engineering projects of the past. To be sure, social scientists have no reason for celebrating their previous attempts at making predictions about the effects of certain intended manipulations in the social world.

But before we become too pessimistic about causal manipulation, let us consider examples from comparative-historical analysis. In *The Dark Side of Democracy*, Mann makes several unconditional predictions. For example, he predicts that ethnic cleansing and mass murder are nearing an end in Europe (pp. 506-509). Although immigration will continue and possibly accelerate, it will not trigger ethnic cleansing, with a few important possible exceptions around the European periphery. Outside of the advanced-industrial nations, Mann identifies about 50 ethnic groups with plausible and achievable claims to political sovereignty. Several of these, he argues, will not be defeated, raising the possibility of interminable conflict. Thus, he writes that, “I predict that Indonesia will be unable to assimilate or repress Aceh or West Papuan autonomy movements; India will be unable to assimilate or repress Muslim Kashmiris or several of its small border peoples; Sri Lanka will be unable to assimilate or repress Tamils; Macedonia will be unable to assimilate or repress Albanians; Turkey, Iran, and Iraq will be unable to assimilate or repress Kurdish movements . . . .” (p. 523). Mann goes on to make specific predictions for 11 different ethnic groups.

At the end of his book, after presenting these predictions, Mann writes: “Can we in the North help the countries of the South avoid the worst scenarios, which are, after all, those of our own past? Yes, since we have seen that geopolitical contexts matter considerably . . . .” (p. 525). He then goes on to suggest specific causal manipulations. He predicts that “trials are unlikely to deter radicals from atrocities” (p. 528). He predicts

that a World Criminal Court with full U.S. backing, while extremely unlikely, might very well allow the South to avoid the murderous history of the North. Thus, while he believes that ethnic cleaning is extremely likely to be widespread in the South, he also suggests a specific causal intervention that might dampen this trend. Since Mann himself is not in control of this intervention, he can directly control the outcome.

Another example here.

Comparative-historical researchers thus sometimes assert that a given influence or intervention would lead to a certain outcome in the future. I can only guess that these influences are almost always ideas about how to avoid negative outcomes and achieve more desirable ones. That is, comparative-historical researchers propose ideas about how we might change the world to make it better.

In many ways, proposed policies or interventions amount to conditional predictions. The condition is simply the intervention or manipulation (i.e., if a certain intervention happens, then a certain outcome will happen), and the prediction is the outcome that is expected to occur. If the researcher is not in direct control of the intervention, however, an unconditional prediction may still be made. For example, although Mann proposes a World Criminal Court with genuine U.S. backing as a solution to ethnic cleansing, he does not think this influence/condition is going to happen. So he ends up making a more or less unconditional prediction, one that holds that mass murder will be common in the South over the next several decades.

For the macro-level outcomes under study in comparative-historical research, the kind of interventions that would be needed to promote more desirable outcomes in the future may be completely out of the control of the researcher. Indeed, comparative-

historical researchers tend to emphasize the causal importance of large processes, big structures, and overarching cultural orientations. These are not the kinds of things that can be manipulated at will. By definition, in fact, structures and cultures tend toward stability and exist independently of particular actors. As a result, predictions based on manipulations in comparative-historical research may have a quite speculative or hypothetical quality to them.

If causes are not easily manipulated, or perhaps cannot be manipulated at all, then why should the researcher even argue that a given manipulation would lead to a given outcome? Most basically, I think, these arguments help avoid the reification of the world and suggest ways in which things could, in principle, be better. They call attention to “possibilities” and alternative futures, regardless of their likelihood. These projections, in effect, follow Hirschman’s admonition: when the probabilities for desirable outcomes seem low, it is especially imperative for the researcher to uncover possibilities for achieving those outcomes.

## **Conclusion**

The main point of most comparative-historical studies is to provide insight into past occurrences. Rarely if ever are these studies are *mainly* oriented toward making generalizations beyond the past. Still, many comparative-historical researchers do believe that their findings speak to the present and future, sometimes in fairly direct ways. And they may discuss these future-oriented implications in the conclusions of their work. Given this, I have inquired about the nature of these predictions and some of their methodological requirements.

By way of conclusion, I want to briefly consider the larger purposes of predictions. I would not want to argue that comparative-historical studies that make clear future-oriented predictions are in some way inherently superior to those that do not. Nevertheless, I do see at least three useful results growing out of these predictions.

First, predictions about the future can provide some basis for assessing an argument about the past. For example, if Goodwin is wrong about the future of social revolutions, it casts some doubt on his causal claims about past social revolutions. After all, he derives the prediction based on the same theory that he uses to explain the past revolutions. If the theory is wrong about the future, he needs to explain why it is still valid for the past. By the same token, if his prediction is correct, it seems to strengthen his causal argument about past revolutions. This is perhaps especially true given that other scholars (e.g., John Foran and Eric Selbin) disagree with him about the end of the era of social revolutions. In a way, the future provides additional cases with which to evaluate their arguments. And with these future cases, the outcome is not known in advance, providing a fully legitimate “test” in which no in advance “peeking” takes place.

Second, predictions about the future can be informative and fun. On the latter, my hope is that readers enjoyed going through the predictions listed in this paper. And I will try to gather together a larger glossary of them (please send me any examples of which you are aware, including your own). Predictions are fun because they are interesting to think about. They are also informative. They help scholars sharpen their arguments. Making predictions, even if tentative and uncertain, may help scholars address the implications that logically follow from their assumptions. They can help

scholars see more clearly the ways in which they do and do not agree with other scholars. And they can help readers better appreciate the assumptions embedded in the argument.

Finally, when predictions and joined with the possibility of influence, comparative-historical sociology might realize the promises of both critical theory and policy science -- i.e., the promises of changing the world in desired ways. The emancipatory goals of critical theory have always required that analysts be able to identify what Brian Fay (1975) once called “quasi-causal laws.” Critical theorists must establish bounded generalizations (Fay’s quasi-causal laws) in order to know how to change the world for the better in the future. How else can the critical theorist suggest interventions that might liberate people? Policy scientists, too, depend on predictions to make suggestions about the best policy means to achieve some pre-determined end. A policy recommendation is, after all, predicated on a prediction about what will happen given a specific policy choice. Prediction and influence thus bring together scholars with substantially different epistemologies.

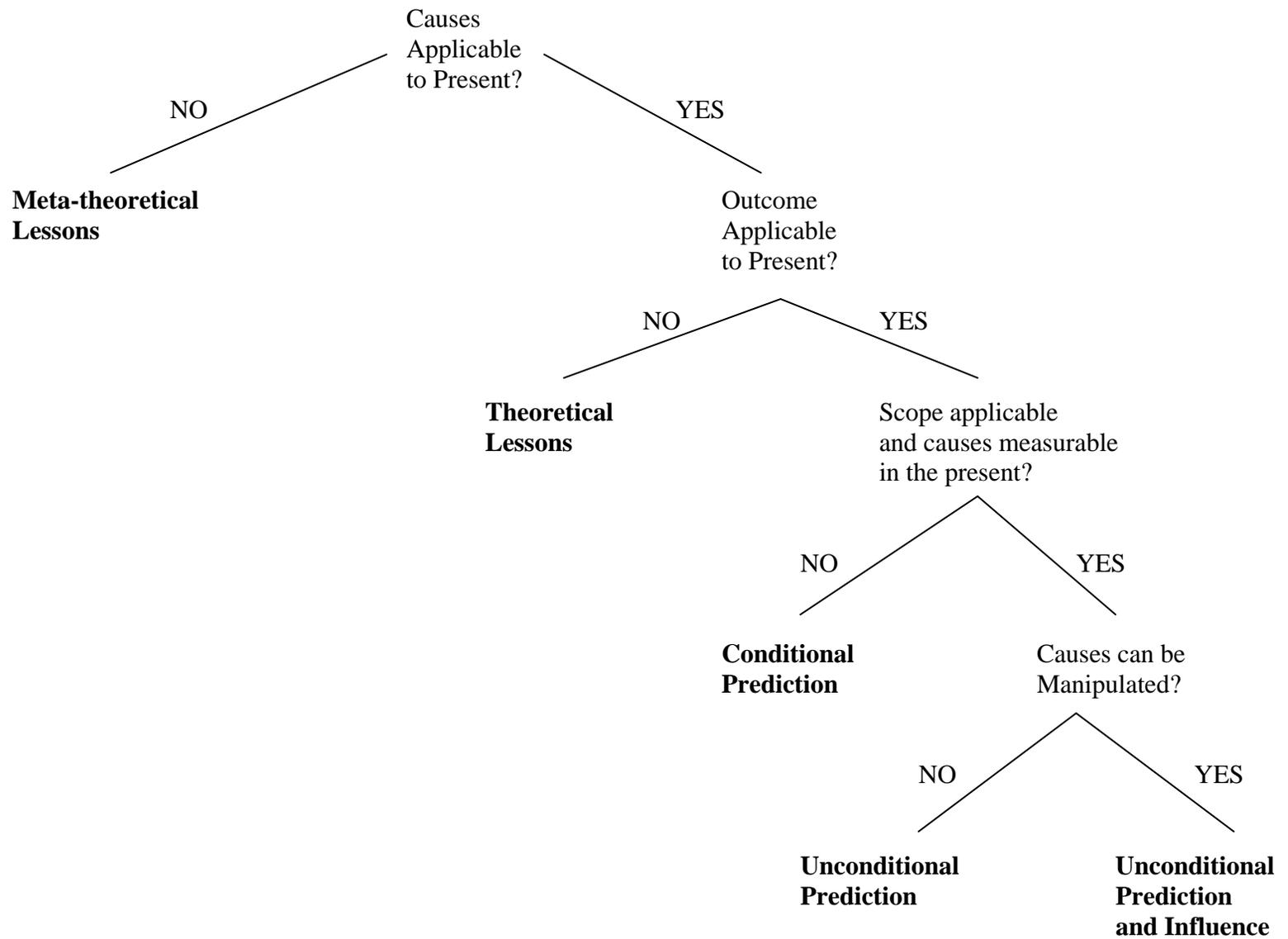
Of course, not all comparative and historical sociologists will feel comfortable with the idea of prediction, much less using those predictions to intervene in the world. And not all should. For, as this paper has suggested, there are substantial methodological requirements that must be met before comparative-historical scholars can draw lessons about what will happen in the times to come. Yet when the requirements are met, I predict that some comparative-historical researchers will find making predictions to be appropriate and irresistible.

## **References (not complete)**

- Abbott, Andrew. 2001. *Time Matters: On Theory and Method*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Bell, Daniel. 1964. "Twelve Modes of Prediction—A Preliminary Sorting of Approaches in the Social Sciences," *Daedalus* 93, no. 3 (Summer): 845-880.
- Bell, Wendell. 2008/1997. *Foundations of Future Studies*, 2 vols. New Brunswick: Transaction.
- Bell, Wendell, and Jeffrey K. Olick. 1989. "An Epistemology for the Futures Field: Problems and Possibilities of Prediction.." *Futures*, April.
- Centeno, Miguel Angel. 2002. *Blood and Debt: War and the Nation-State in Latin America*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press.
- Collier, David, and John Gerring, eds. 2009. *Concepts and Method in Social Science: The Tradition of Giovanni Sartori*. New York: Routledge.
- Collins, Randall. 1995. *American Journal of Sociology* 100, no. 6 (May 1995):
- Drèze, Jean, and Amartya Sen. 1989. *Hunger and Public Action*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ertman, Thomas. 1997. *Birth of the Leviathan: Building States and Regimes in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Fay, Brian. 1975. *Social Theory and Political Practice*. London: George Allen and Unwin.
- Fulbrook, Mary. 1983. *Piety and Politics: Religion and the Rise of Absolutism in England, Württemberg, and Prussia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Goertz, Gary. 2006. *Social Science Concepts: A User's Guide*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Goldstone, Jack A. 1998a. "Initial Conditions, General Laws, Path Dependence, and Explanation in Historical Sociology." *American Journal of Sociology* 104:829-845.
- Goldstone, Jack A. 1998b. "The Problem of the 'Early Modern' World." *Journal of Economic and Social History of the Orient* 41:249-84.
- Goldstone, Jack A. Forthcoming book that used to be called *The Happy Chance*.
- Goodwin, Jeff. *No Other Way Out: States and Revolutionary Movements, 1945-1991*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kiser, Edgar. 1995. "What Can Sociological Theories Predict? Comment on Collins, Kuran, and Tilly," *American Journal of Sociology* 100, no. 6 (May 1995): 1611-15.
- Mahoney, James. 2001. *The Legacies of Liberalism: Path Dependence and Political Regimes in Central America*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Mann, Michael. 2005. *The Dark Side of Democracy: Explaining Ethnic Cleansing*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Popper, Karl. 1957. *The Poverty of Historicism*.
- Portes, Alejandro. 1995. "On Grand Surprises and Modest Certainties: Comment on Kuran, Collins, and Tilly," *American Journal of Sociology* 100, no. 6 (May 1995): 1620-26.
- Rueschemeyer, Dietrich, Evelyne Huber Stephens, and John D. Stephens. 1992. *Capitalist Development and Democracy*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- Silver, Beverly J. 2003. *Forces of Labor: Workers' Movements and Globalization since 1870*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Skocpol, Theda. 1979. *States and Social Revolutions: A Comparative Analysis of France, Russia, and China*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Skocpol, Theda. 1992. *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers: The Political Origins of Social Policy in the United States*. Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Tilly, Charles. 1992. *Coercion, Capital, and European States, AD 990-1992*. Cambridge, Mass.: Balckwell.
- Tilly, Charles. 1995. "To Explain Political Processes," *American Journal of Sociology* 100, no. 6 (May 1995): 1594-1610.
- Alexander Wendt, "Why a World State is Inevitable: Teleology and the Logic of Anarchy," *European Journal of International Relations* 9:4 (December 2003): 491-542.
- Robert Wright, *Nonzero: The Logic of Human Destiny* (New York: Random House, 2000).

**Figure 1**  
Generalizing Past the Past: A Framework



Comparative-historical study of languages in general, uses a variety of special techniques-techniques. It seems appropriate in this general complex system of scientific methods of comparative-historical research, not forgetting about its integrity, provide separate special tricks for closer consideration. Comparative-historical method will make and unrelated languages, unless they are still genetically identical units. For example, this method is applicable to a joint study of the German language and zapadnofinskih as words such as Finnish. kuningas, rengas, kultaHT.n., historically, respectiv