1. Introduction

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Comparative politics is confronted with important challenges today that have the potential to question the very foundations it has been built upon. These challenges have their origins in different developments that are not necessarily directly linked to each other but which – combined – undermine the capacity of the discipline to produce reliable knowledge on causal processes and events in the real world. At present we detect four main challenges that create ‘stress’ for disciplinary reproduction and advancement:

(1) Recent developments linked to the globalization of political, economic, and social relations have questioned the functionality of the nation-state as the main object of investigation and as the main reference point of comparison in comparative studies. Above all, doubts are raised about the assumption of the ‘independence’ of nation-states as units of analysis, which has until now characterized comparative research. These doubts lead to serious discussion about the validity of causal statements made on the basis of the comparison between nation-states. The influence of international and supranational factors as well as the strengthening of the regional level in national political entities have contributed to a general discussion about ‘de-nationalization’ and the emergence of other political units that are relevant for explanations in comparative research. Globalization has also added complexity merely by highlighting that interdependence might be an important additional explanatory dimension to be included in the causal frameworks used by comparative scientists.
Comparative politics

(2) As Peter Hall has spelled out in a seminal book chapter, new ‘ontologies’ should be taken seriously (Hall 2003), i.e. fundamental causal beliefs, that today require a new alignment with theories and methods. The fundamental conceptual challenges Hall sketches in this respect all raise the increased complexity of concept-building and use of methodologies nowadays:

- the move away from the use of the (often quantitative) measurement of direct causal relationships to causal ‘mechanisms’, which need richer information and qualitative-oriented, or even mixed, research designs;
- the inclusion of an ‘interactive causality’ instead of an unidirectional causality;
- the inclusion of the time dimension as a causal factor;
- The recognition of the multi-causal character of real-life events and, hence, the abandoning of mono-causal, bivariate relationships.

(3) The availability of an exponentially growing stock of empirical information that constantly needs new and more refined concepts and methods in order to deal with the data in adequate ways. The increasing complexity due to available information and continually renewed scientific tools to deal with this information raises questions about the capacity of the discipline to accumulate knowledge, i.e. to process existing knowledge in such a way that theories, concepts, hypotheses, and methodological applications integrate the knowledge produced before. Failure to do so results in a fragmentation of knowledge constantly ‘re-inventing the wheel’ without visible progress.

(4) There have been further paradigmatic developments during the last 20 years, which have put the issue of complexity in comparative politics on its research agenda. For example, the ‘interpretive paradigm’ (Yanow 2014) has challenged the overtly positivist orientation in comparative politics by insisting on ‘meaning’ and ‘discourses’ of actors as the main explanatory tool. This was not only another way of explaining the world but also demanded a research approach, which is explicitly time- and context-bound. Understanding discourses and interpretation makes sense only in their spatial and temporal contexts. As a consequence,
contextual information becomes an important part of causal explanations in this tradition and explanatory schemes become ever more complex. The *Handbook of Contextual Political Analysis* (Goodin and Tilly 2006) epitomizes a distinctive intellectual effort to move causal explanations from parsimonious and abstract causal hypotheses to explanations based on the inclusion of empirical and relevant variety with strong implications for causal inference and the use of adequate methods.

These four challenges are located on different levels – changes in the ‘real world’ such as globalization, changes in the thinking of comparative scientists about how best to explain political events, and changes in the amount of information available for scientific treatment – but they have in common the fact that they substantially increase the complexity in concept-building and methodological development. We believe that this process of increasing complexity poses problems for a discipline which is for the most part built on the search for parsimonious, unidirectional and reductionist explanatory schemes. Complexity challenges the capacity of a discipline to adapt in a permanent and adequate way to external and internal challenges.

But this is not all. We also believe that the four challenges also resurrect long-standing problems of comparative politics, problems that can almost be considered as intractable because they have existed for a long time without being unequivocally solved. This nexus of rising complexity and the evocation of long-standing and tough problems can be seen as a major challenge for the continuation of the discipline, and it is not only worthwhile but also necessary to analyse the problems and solutions that are linked to these developments.

We argue that five such persisting problems are raised by the challenges in comparative research – the problem of ‘interdependence’; the problem of ‘multi-level functioning’ of politics; the tension between parsimony and variety; the problem of multiple methods; and, finally, the problem of how to accumulate knowledge and avoid unrelated addition of knowledge. We will take up each one of these problems and explain their ‘intractability’.
1.1 THE PROBLEM OF INTERDEPENDENCE

The effects of globalization on comparative research have increasingly become an important topic for comparative politics. The proliferation of contacts, agreements, trade, and ideas across the globe has contributed to profound changes in politics and policies of nation-states. For comparative politics the effect is not only that the number of relevant actors in national political decisions has risen and that the international dimension has received more attention as a causal explanatory factor in comparison to earlier times, but above all that long-held beliefs (mentioned above) about the independence of ‘units of investigation’, i.e. the nation-state, were put into doubt.

The questioning of the assumption that the behaviour of observed units of research are independent from each other started in the nineteenth century and has remained part of in the discipline of comparative politics under the name ‘Galton’s problem’. Despite the early insights of Francis Galton, comparative politics was nevertheless long able to ‘forget’ and put aside the implications that this problem seemed to have for the making of causal inferences. Comparative politics continued to be built most of the time upon the assumption that the observation of differences and similarities between the units of observation can abstract from possible causal influences between these units. What Galton suggested in fact was that there might be influences from one unit on another by ‘diffusion’ effects. If, however, the behaviour of one unit of observation is at least partially influenced by its interdependence on other units, then making abstraction of these influences distorts any conclusion about causal relationships and should be subject to criticism. The spread of political institutions, their variance and their similar patterns in space, can for example be thought of as being dependent on certain geographical or economic conditions but they can also be subject to – and this was the argument put forward by Galton – diffusion of certain cultural patterns that are distributed among the units of observation. If one does not take the possible interdependence on the base of cultural patterns into account, one arrives at wrong or at least partially wrong conclusions about the kind of causal factors that are influencing the variation in institutional patterns between countries.
Modern globalization has put this problem back on the agenda of comparative politics because it has made the existence of possible diffusion effects so very obvious. Globalization has multiplied the relationships of nation-states with other nation-states or with international actors which has lead to the possibility that what is decided or what is happening within nation-states is increasingly part of a more global process in which the decisions of national units of observation are more dependent on decisions and behaviour in other units.

This raises the question of how ‘interdependence’ as an explanatory dimension can be incorporated within comparative politics. There have probably been good reasons not to do it until recently: dealing with interdependence both in a conceptual and methodological way certainly needs different methodological instruments from those which have been used for a long time in comparative politics, and it demands profound thinking about how to combine the assumptions of independence and interdependence or how to replace independence by interdependence. We need to consider how to value the relative influence of each dimension when interdependence is important enough to be taken into account, and indeed whether we should still use independence at all. The persistence of the problem has not had further consequences for causal inferences until now simply because it was discarded from the research agenda. Globalization makes this more and more unsuitable, and it is therefore of the utmost importance for the capacity of comparative politics to develop valid causal statements to understand in what way diffusion and interdependence can become part of the disciplinary canon today.

1.2 THE ‘MULTI-LEVEL PROBLEM’

Globalization – and more specifically de-nationalization – also triggers another persistent problem, again linked to a questioning of the autonomous and above all unitary character of decision-making and behaviour of national, political units: the multi-level character of political decisions and behaviour.

In fact, two research agendas have touched upon this problem, which, again, is not completely new but has been dealt with to some extent in comparative federalism research, without actually
producing any satisfying solutions: one is the research agenda evoked by research on the European Union (supranationalism), and the other is research on the growing influence of the regional dimension in national policy-making, especially after the fall of the Soviet Union (USSR).

The role of the European Union (EU) in national policy-making provoked a similar discussion of interdependence as mentioned in the context of globalization: obviously, EU member states lost the capacity to decide independently in several policy areas because of treaty obligations, regulations and EU laws that restrained the room for manoeuvre considerably. This had similar implications for making causal inferences about the behaviour of nation-states in a context of globalization. For example, an explanation of the timing and intensity of the introduction of fiscal rules in advanced industrial states during the last 20 years based on crisis pressure or party control would produce a biased correlation if it did not take into account that member states of the eurozone are bound by contracts, regulations and oversight. This leads to a more uniform and coordinated behaviour in comparison to other regions in the world. Any conclusion based on a measurement of similarities and differences between states would produce invalid statements. It would be ‘over-determined’ by the influence of a ‘superior’ level of political decision-making on at least some of the countries in the population.

However, another problem arises here: if such ‘superior’ political bodies – and this can also be an international organization such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) or the United Nations (UN) – have systematic decision-making capacity on issues that need to be decided at the national level, they become integral parts of the ‘unit of observation’ and should be accounted for in concept-building and methodological application.

Decentralization, devolution, and also federalism have become more frequent subjects in comparative politics because of the rise of movements fighting for regional sovereignty after the fall of the USSR and a more general tendency to devolve central competencies to the regional level – both in federal and unitary states – since the 1990s. These tendencies have been supplemented by the spread of ‘functional units’ in various policy sectors that can crossover national and regional levels (Hooghe and Marks 2001). This has drawn attention to old and new relationships between the central
and the national level. As federal research has long demonstrated, these relationships are seldom hierarchically ordered, implying a strong dominance of the centre. On the contrary, they often become contingent on agreements and negotiations between both levels. How exactly the relationships are organized varies but they all share one common characteristic, that they indicate the existence of an additional territorial level of governance which should be taken into consideration when analysing the governance capacity of nation-states or any political decisions that are taken in the context of nation-states.

The supra-national, international, and regional level differentiate the previously ‘unitary’ character of the nation-state in comparative research into several levels of decision-making. These levels are – and this is important – not to be conceptualized in terms of clear hierarchies (which would allow abstraction of the less important decision-making levels) or in any temporally sequential way when decisions are taken, but in terms of a ‘multi-level unit of observation’. National politics and policies must be understood in terms of a ‘collective subject’, a political entity in which many actors on different territorial and functional levels contribute simultaneously to the production of policy outputs. Interdependencies, interaction, or coordination become key terms again in such a decision-making context. Understanding the interplay of different forces at different levels demands new concepts and methods.

Comparative federal research has for a long time been confronted with the interplay of above all the two levels of federal and regional governments (and occasionally the municipal level). Concepts to understand the inter-relationships have, however, been rare – one example would be the ‘joint decision-making theory’ presented by Scharpf (1985) – and it needed the EU as an empirical object to relaunch the discussion about ‘multi-level’ concepts in comparative federal research.

One can, therefore, contend that the coexistence of several decision-making levels has probably raised old questions but has also been brought to a qualitatively new level by the incorporation of the supra-national level as well as by the horizontal level brought into being by the phenomena of delegation, agencification, and administrative decentralization. The complexity of concept-building has been raised in due consequence considerably, and it needs to be seen to what extent the persisting problem of conceiving the
The simultaneous and interactive influence of several decision-making units has been treated and resolved in discussions. The problem of interdependence and the ‘multi-level problem’ have some affinities in that they question the image of an independent and unitary object of observation, i.e. of the nation-state. Both launch a debate about the de-nationalization of nation-states, and both deal with existing problems which have not been given sufficient attention in comparative politics. This has changed with recent developments, and both problems have found their place on the disciplinary agenda. It will be discussed in this book to what extent the theoretical and methodological discussions have contributed to disarm the ‘intractability’ of the problem. But it is clear that the treatment of these problems has consequences for ‘Humean causality’ (Hall 2003) that lies at the heart of comparative politics. The integration of interdependence and multi-level causal relations needs a different concept of causality. Partly, Peter Hall has put this forward in his discussion of the alignment of ontologies and methods. Interaction, temporality and multi-causality are important parts of the ‘new’ ontology developing in comparative politics. The persisting problems treated here can be seen as part of the discussion on how new ontologies can become part of the disciplinary canon of comparative politics and how methods, concepts and ontologies can be accommodated.

1.3 THE ‘PARSIMONY AND VARIETY PROBLEM’

The requests of scholars to systematically take context information into account when developing causal hypotheses, the evolution of ‘grounded theory’ as a methodological instrument, and the focus on time- and space-specific environments in the interpretivist paradigm all point to a long-standing and – in contrast to the previously mentioned problems – continuously virulent discussion in comparative politics.

Explaining events in the world by means of complexity reduction and causal inference while not losing grip on the richness of contexts and events has been a continuous challenge for comparative politics since the turn towards ‘Humean causality’ in the 1950s. The strife to maintain requisite ‘variety’ and the ambition to find causal, systematic explanations is almost an antinomy, because the
making of causal inferences necessarily relies on making abstractions by reducing the manifold information.

No description, no matter how thick, and no explanation, no matter how many explanatory factors go into it, comes close to capturing the full ‘blooming and buzzing’ reality of the world. (King, Keohane and Verba 1994: 43)

To be both ‘general’ and ‘specific’ (ibid.), to talk about ‘classes of events as well as about specific events at particular places’ (ibid.), remains a continuous challenge. The confrontation has been played out after the Second World War in the strife for dominance between ‘area studies’ and ‘structural-functionalist’ explanatory accounts of political events. It has accompanied discussions about the usefulness and usage of case studies. It has been a constant challenge in the use of classifications in comparative research, and it is a frequent topic in debates about the choice of quantitative or qualitative methods. Though King et al. were convinced to have found answers helping to combine the ‘general’ and ‘specific’ in their book on scientific inference (King, Keohane and Verba 1994), discussions have not stopped (Brady and Collier 2004). The rising complexity caused by globalization, the increase in information and available theories and methods, as well as the new developing ontologies, point moreover to new challenges relating to the old question of reconciling context-rich variety and parsimonious modelling of causal relationships. The integration of interaction, multicausality, and temporality in comparative research causes problems for concept-building and use of methods which are mostly built on parsimonious causal modelling.

It is in this context that the rise of rational choice theory becomes interesting. Rational choice is built on a number of fundamental and parsimonious assumptions, which, like structural functionalism, are used to dispose of ready-made interpretational schemes for understanding the complexity of the world. The assumptions are highly abstract and denounce spatial and temporary variations in the working of the causal mechanisms. Rational choice can be seen as the polar opposite to the discussions on the influence of context and the foundation of explanations on the base of interpretation and discourse: it aims to reduce complexity while others are demanding
the integration of more complexity. It is important to understand how this tension plays out today.

1.4 THE PROBLEM OF DEALING WITH ‘MULTIPLE METHODS’

Another challenge with which comparative politics is confronted is the increasing number of methods available, the differentiation of research objects, the heterogenization of concepts, and the further development of ontologies seeking for new alignments of all these elements in a coherent analytical framework. In this regard, the most persistent problem is related to the continuing distinction between quantitative and qualitative research, which is sometimes even configuring a paradigmatic struggle between scientific communities that perceive themselves as ‘culturally’ opposed.

To counterbalance this tendency, a plural vision of methodology emerged in the historical context of the 1990s. The goal of methodological pluralism is to help comparative scientists to adopt the most suitable research strategy for tackling a given research question in a given context, without ‘ideological’ limitations. What is more, the application of diverse tools and methods could strengthen, validate, and reinforce findings in a scientific environment where the use of recognized and sophisticated methods is more and more commonplace. Accordingly, on the one hand, case study research became increasingly systematic and sophisticated, while macro-statistical researchers recognized the contribution of qualitative studies in theory development and for the close inspection of outliers and other special cases. On the other hand, mixed methods became increasingly widespread to reinforce other research traditions and even combined together in a unified framework of inference. Moreover, new methods were developed to go beyond the qualitative-quantitative dualism, as for example with qualitative comparative analysis.

In this context, the main issues concern the need for providing guidance in the endeavour of mixing methods and deal with the increasing sophistication of techniques for data analysis. While pluralism is warranted, a situation where ‘anything goes’ should be avoided. Some coherent choices regarding research design have to be made in accordance with the research goals. Similarly, there is
no solution for all situations. Instead, the researcher is expected to be aware of the trade-off associated with specific research approaches and methods. Although pluralism requires the use of diverse analytical tools, there are also practical limitations to the number of techniques that a researcher can master. Finally, clear intersubjective criteria for ensuring the quality of studies based on multiple approaches and techniques and systematic guidance on how to deal with these problems are still to be developed.

1.5 THE PROBLEM OF ACCUMULATING KNOWLEDGE

Knowledge accumulation is typically scarce in the social sciences and it is particularly weak in comparative politics. The objects of comparative politics are diverse, and historically contingent, new but transient analytical frameworks constantly emerge and vanish. This leads to a situation where knowledge blocks, such as frameworks, theories, concepts and empirical findings, are mostly juxtaposed without necessarily connecting to each other. The difficulty of progressing through a coherent pattern of development is to some extent inherent in the nature of the social sciences, but these problems are magnified in the case of comparative politics. Macro-comparative research typically struggles to reconcile its aim of attaining a certain level of cross-case generalization with the necessity of focusing on a non-random, quite heterogeneous, relatively small set of countries as units of analysis. So far, the empirical answers provided by comparative politics to crucial questions such as the dynamics of war and peace, the emergence of social inequality, the explanation of specific institutional forms, the consequences of economic crises, and so on and so forth, are indeed both partially contradictory and highly case-specific.

Scientific progress is difficult in comparative politics because general laws and grand theories are unlikely in the social sciences and especially improbable in this field, as political phenomena and events are historically contingent and only imperfectly comparable across large numbers of entities. However, limiting the scope of the analysis to the non-generalizable attributes of the few cases under investigation is likewise unhelpful for knowledge progress. The scientific ambition of research in comparative politics, taken as a
whole, should neither be developing law-like wide-ranging theories nor of developing extremely narrow case studies. This conundrum represents an enduring problem for which no definitive solution has been put forward, but which is attracting increasing attention by scholars in the field.

To sum up, the objective of this book is to discuss in detail the dual challenge of rising complexity and the persistence of a number of important problems in comparative politics. It is organized around the five problems mentioned above, with the intention of revealing the fundamentals of the problems, their historical treatment in comparative politics, and possible solutions that have been offered so far, and discussing the probability that such solutions might be able to overcome or disarm the ‘intractability’ of the problems. The chapters should, in other words, tell us whether we are able to overcome the shortcomings found in the existing treatment of enduring problems and whether new answers and solutions can be seen as an adequate answer to the rise in complexity of comparative politics.

The chapters are the following: The first two chapters are dedicated to the topic of ‘de-nationalization’ in the context of globalization. In Chapter 2, Detlef Jahn and Sebastian Stephan take up the problem of interdependence and demonstrate how the discipline neglected this topic for a long time before new methodological developments seem to have introduced ways to take up the challenge and integrate interdependence into the disciplinary canon. The chapter discusses to what extent and how effectively this has happened. Daniel Kübler presents in Chapter 3 ‘de-nationalization’ as a challenge for comparative politics and ‘multi-level governance theory’ as the major solution to dealing with the ‘multi-level’ character of policy-making.

Persisting problems triggered by developments within comparative politics are the topic of the next three chapters. In Chapter 4 Dietmar Braun uses classifications as an entry point to understand the longstanding problem of variety and parsimony in comparative politics. He additionally attempts to judge upon recent attempts in classification-building of both dealing with more complexity – the dimension of multi-causality – and more parsimonious rational choice models. Martino Maggetti and Olivier Giraud address in Chapter 5 the rise in the number of methods used in comparative politics.
politics which cause problems of fragmentation and opposition. They investigate the emerging attempts of integration and synthesis, and their capacity to accommodate the variety of methods and probably to overcome the complexity raised by the large number of existing methods. Finally, in Chapter 6, Martino Maggetti takes up the challenge of assessing to what extent comparative politics is capable of overcoming problems of complexity by looking into the ways and means of the discipline to achieve reflexive knowledge accumulation. The capacity of a discipline to accumulate knowledge in a reflexive way is of utmost importance, but it is seldom discussed whether and how this can be done. The rise in concepts, theories, and methods makes it all the more important to have a fundamental reflection on this topic. Finally, our short concluding chapter brings all together and reviews the remaining issues that call for further attention.

REFERENCES


