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by John H Goldthorpe

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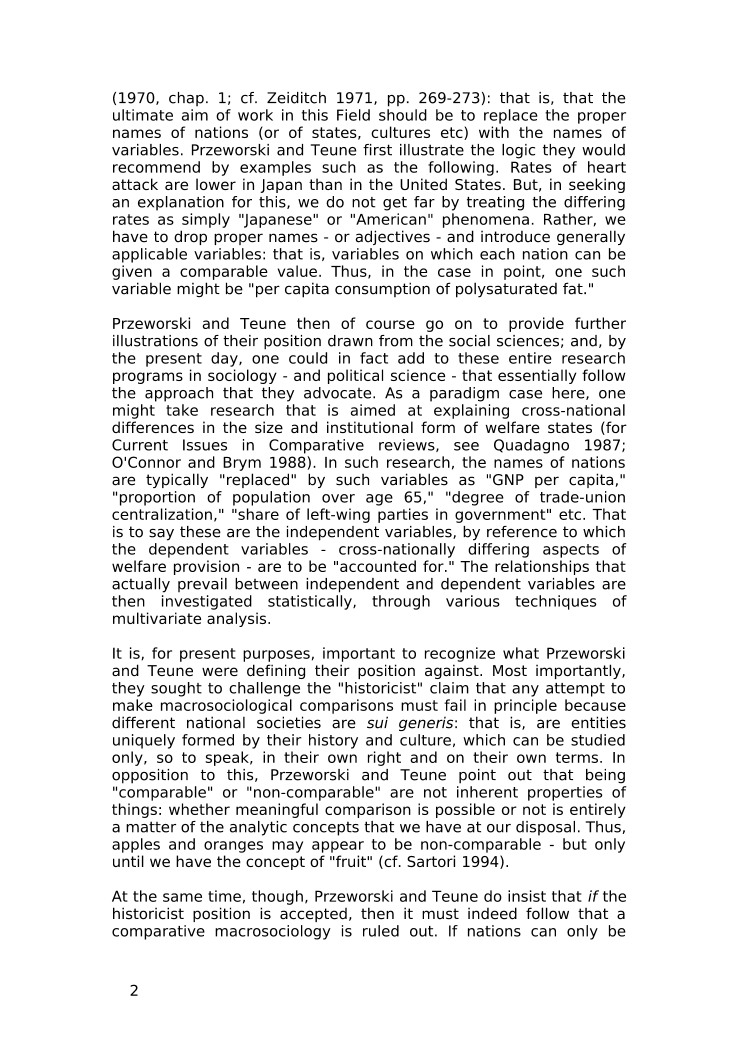
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Current issues in comparative macrosociology: a debate on methodological issues

CURRENT ISSUES IN COMPARATIVE MACROSOCIOLOGY:  
A DEBATE ON METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES  
John H. Goldthorpe  
Comparative Social Research, Volume 16, 1997, pages 1-26.  
ABSTRACT  
Within comparative macrosociology, quantitative or "variable oriented" and   
qualitative or "case-oriented" methodologies are typically counterposed. It is,   
however, argued that in this way the nature of key methodological problems is   
often obscured. Three such problems - labeled the small N, the Gallon and the   
black-box problems - are shown to arise with both approaches, and a critique is   
advanced of recent claims by exponents of case-oriented work that that they   
dispose of special and privileged means of by-passing or overcoming these   
problems.  
I seek in this chapter to intervene in what is in fact a rather long-  
standing debate within comparative macrosociology, but one which   
appears of late to have acquired new vigor. The contending parties   
in this debate are now usually characterized as exponents of   
quantitative, "variable-oriented" methodologies, on the one hand,   
and of qualitative, "case-oriented" methodologies, on the other (see   
e.g., Ragin 1987; Rueschemeyer 1991; Janoski and Hicks 1994). I   
shall, however, argue that while the issues caught up in the   
protracted and complex exchanges that have occurred do include   
ones of major importance, the form that the debate has taken has   
not been especially helpful in highlighting just what these issues   
are, nor yet in pointing to ways in which they might be more   
effectively addressed.  
I shall develop my position as follows. To begin with, I give a brief   
account of the contrast, or opposition, that has been set up between   
variable-oriented and case-oriented approaches. I then pursue my   
central argument by considering three rather well-known   
methodological problems that are encountered in the practice of   
comparative macrosociology. These problems are ones that have in   
fact been chiefly discussed in connection with variable-oriented   
research. But, I aim to show, they are present to no less a degree in   
case-oriented studies and, contrary to what several prominent   
authors have maintained or implied, the latter can claim no special   
advantages in dealing with them. Largely on account of   
misconceptions in this regard, I conclude, much recent discussion   
has tended to obscure, and divert attention away from, questions of   
method that comparative macrosociology does now need to engage   
with more actively 0 in whatever style it may be carried out.  
VARIABLE-ORIENTED VERSUS CASE-ORIENTED APPROACHES  
The variable-oriented approach to comparative macrosociology   
stems from a now famous proposal made by Przeworski and Teune   
1

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(1970, chap. 1; cf. Zeiditch 1971, pp. 269-273): that is, that the   
ultimate aim of work in this Field should be to replace the proper   
names of nations (or of states, cultures etc) with the names of   
variables. Przeworski and Teune first illustrate the logic they would   
recommend by examples such as the following. Rates of heart   
attack are lower in Japan than in the United States. But, in seeking   
an explanation for this, we do not get far by treating the differing   
rates as simply "Japanese" or "American" phenomena. Rather, we   
have to drop proper names - or adjectives - and introduce generally   
applicable variables: that is, variables on which each nation can be   
given a comparable value. Thus, in the case in point, one such   
variable might be "per capita consumption of polysaturated fat."  
Przeworski and Teune then of course go on to provide further   
illustrations of their position drawn from the social sciences; and, by   
the present day, one could in fact add to these entire research   
programs in sociology - and political science - that essentially follow   
the approach that they advocate. As a paradigm case here, one   
might take research that is aimed at explaining cross-national   
differences in the size and institutional form of welfare states (for   
Current Issues in Comparative reviews, see Quadagno 1987;   
O'Connor and Brym 1988). In such research, the names of nations   
are typically "replaced" by such variables as "GNP per capita,"   
"proportion of population over age 65," "degree of trade-union   
centralization," "share of left-wing parties in government" etc. That   
is to say these are the independent variables, by reference to which   
the dependent variables - cross-nationally differing aspects of   
welfare provision - are to be "accounted for." The relationships that   
actually prevail between independent and dependent variables are   
then investigated statistically, through various techniques of   
multivariate analysis.  
It is, for present purposes, important to recognize what Przeworski   
and Teune were defining their position against. Most importantly,   
they sought to challenge the "historicist" claim that any attempt to   
make macrosociological comparisons must fail in principle because   
different national societies are sui generis: that is, are entities   
uniquely formed by their history and culture, which can be studied   
only, so to speak, in their own right and on their own terms. In   
opposition to this, Przeworski and Teune point out that being   
"comparable" or "non-comparable" are not inherent properties of   
things: whether meaningful comparison is possible or not is entirely   
a matter of the analytic concepts that we have at our disposal. Thus,   
apples and oranges may appear to be non-comparable - but only   
until we have the concept of "fruit" (cf. Sartori 1994).  
At the same time, though, Przeworski and Teune do insist that if the   
historicist position is accepted, then it must indeed follow that a   
comparative macrosociology is ruled out. If nations can only be   
2