

A manifesto for 'slow' comparative research on work and employment

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Abstract

This paper provides a defence of, and framework for, comparative research in industrial and employment relations based on a long-term, in-depth engagement with the social contexts under study. It locates such 'slow' research strategies in relation to predominant comparative research strategies, and establishes a number of basic precepts of slow comparativism as a practical methodological approach. The paper aims to provoke a discussion among those conducting comparative research on work and employment about how truth claims are generated in general. It also seeks to provide a basis by which those conducting slower forms of comparativism, through what we term 'implicit ethnographies', can find better ways of developing and defending their modes of research within a broader academic political economy which is not always favourable to such approaches.

Keywords

Comparative methodology, comparative industrial relations, slow scholarship, sociology of work

Introduction

This paper addresses cross-national comparative research in industrial and employment relations. Its aim is to articulate a case, and provide a framework for, research which makes a long-term, in-depth engagement with the social contexts under study, in order to gain deeper and more reliable insights into the nature of, and reasons for, cross-national differences and similarities. We call this form of research engagement 'slow' comparativism.

Our argument stems from a concern that the ecology of cross-national comparative research has, in recent years, altered in ways which are not favourable to in-depth comparisons. While there has been an increase in the volume of research which covers multiple national contexts, much of this research is based on rather thin forms of comparativism: in other words, it is characterised by limited sociological engagement with the dynamics of the societies under study. This has resulted in, at best, a limited ability to identify causal factors which are outside the scope of research frameworks determined *ex ante*, and, at worst, flat-out misunderstandings of the local and national dynamics of social action arising from a lack of comprehension of the choices available to actors in particular social settings.

Some of the reasons for this changing ecology result from academic neo-liberalism (Berg and Seeber, 2016; Bryson, 2004; Butler et al, 2017; Collini, 2012). A full discussion of these effects merits a separate investigation. For the current purposes, however, we would highlight the following related pressures. First, the current nature of research culture creates pressures on individuals to be seen as 'global', and therefore creates incentives on researchers to work in national contexts they are not particularly familiar with. Second, there is increased pressure on researchers to find practical answers quickly, such that comparative research is sometimes subordinated to questions of finding general recommendations and enabling the transfer of managerial or policy answers across borders. Third, elite journals often demand schematic depictions of causality, leading to a tendency to place too much emphasis on comparative typologies of nations (see Meardi, 2011, on the limits of national typologies of trade unions). In general, the complications arising from in-depth knowledge of the

meanings of ideas, as interpreted by local actors on the ground, are not always particularly welcomed in these conditions.

We argue that acquiring in-depth knowledge of relevant local social settings on a comparative basis requires research processes which are much more encompassing than what happens in formal research processes such as interviews, and much more iterative than standard expositions of methodology normally allow. This tends to mean that slow comparative research is difficult to evaluate according to the norms of positive science, as data is gathered in relatively idiosyncratic ways. This paper attempts to provide a framework within which such idiosyncrasy can work, while providing data that is cross-nationally comparable.

Some of the challenges that slow comparative research faces are recognised issues within ethnographic research. These include: challenges in accessing the local ‘common sense’ or interpretive frameworks of actors; the challenges, both literal and figurative, of acquiring local languages; and the challenges involved in avoiding ethnocentrism by maintaining a critical distance from the assumptions of research subjects, or the ‘logics’ of particular national systems. Certainly, we advocate an approach to the exercise of comparative research that is reflexive and somewhat ethnographic in spirit (cf. Dufour and Hege, 2002).

However, our framework is not simply an argument for ethnographic research as commonly understood. This is for two reasons. First, while certainly compatible with ethnographic methods, not all iterative, context-sensitive comparative research is ethnographic in a formal sense. We will argue, for example, that there is no reason that those whose formal methodological approach is the standard semi-structured interview cannot engage with slow comparativism, and our framework is intended to aid such efforts. Second, notwithstanding Burawoy’s statement (2009: 12) that ‘comparative studies allowed me to explore the macrofoundations of microprocesses’, formally ethnographic research, at least in the domains of work and employment, is only rarely internationally comparative. One of the reasons for this is the extent of difficulties that arise in creating research projects that are agile enough to tolerate the complications that arise when in-depth research reveals the extent of apparent *non-comparability* between different contexts. Revisiting the famous ‘apples and oranges’ problem of comparative research (Locke and Thelen, 1995), we attempt to provide conceptual resources for what we term ‘federal’ comparative projects, where fieldwork in different countries is seen as constituting projects which are autonomous enough from each other to make sense in local contexts, while at the same time being governed by the need to achieve a sufficient degree of meta-comparability to make sense as overall comparative projects.

The first part of the paper provides a statement of the value of in-depth comparativism within the ecology of comparative IR/ER research. Drawing on this, the second half of the paper presents a number of precepts which we see as necessary to the practice of slow comparativism. We concentrate particularly on the notion of ‘federal’ projects, as it is here that the challenges faced by comparative researchers depart most clearly from other forms of deep, qualitatively-oriented research. Finally, the conclusion considers how a slow comparative agenda might be taken forward.

Comparative research in the context of globalising neo-liberalism

A large volume of research makes knowledge claims based on internationally comparative research. Almond and Gonzalez (2013), focussing only on research on labour management in highly-ranked English-language journals, found 179 papers published between 2001 and 2010 that had some claim to be making explicit cross-national comparisons. The influence of comparative approaches also extends to a large number of single-country studies that make implicit comparisons, drawing substantially upon comparative frameworks in making truth claims (e.g. Dalton and Bingham, 2016). Finally, we frequently see claims in non-comparative work that IR/ER operate in a certain way in a particular country because of its status within a comparative typology – the most common being the argument that the world of work and employment is structured in a particular way in a given country because of its status as a ‘liberal’ or ‘coordinated’ economy.

The methodological handbook of Hantrais and Mangen (1996: 1) defines comparative social research as ‘attempts to study particular issues or phenomena in two or more countries with the

express intention of comparing their manifestation in different socio-cultural settings, using the same research instruments’.

The approach we develop to the practice of slow comparative research presents some qualifications to the necessity/desirability of using the same research instruments. We will return to this below. More broadly, however, Hantrais and Mangen’s working definition alerts us to two issues which are important in considering the status of comparative social research. The first of these regards the status of ‘countries’ as containers of ‘socio-cultural settings’. An earlier generation of comparative research, in rejecting post-war convergence thinking (cf Kerr et al, 1960), rarely questioned the notion that countries – as a shorthand for internationally recognised sovereign states – were territorial containers of society and culture. The methodological frameworks from which most comparative research in IR borrows (e.g. Hall and Soskice, 2001; Maurice et al, 1986; Whitley, 1999) tend to assume that this is largely the case. This has been underpinned by the fact that the direct state regulation of industrial relations remains primarily national-sovereign in organisation, and most trade unions are primarily structured on a national basis. However, even a relatively cursory examination of contemporary political economy shows that such ‘countries’ increasingly lack closure as containers of socio-cultural settings, or as the locus of capitalist regulation (Jessop, 2013; Peck and Theodore, 2007); indeed, the current wave of populist nationalism is in part a response to this. For comparativists, this causes challenges both from below, if socio-cultural settings are seen as substantially deriving from sub-sovereign levels, and from above, if transnational influences are seen as overriding national effects.

The first of these is relatively easy to deal with. If it is plausible that intra-national differences are substantial enough to be seen as differences in socio-cultural settings relevant to the issue being researched, then one can relatively unproblematically perform comparisons within national-sovereign states. This is perhaps most common in cases where there is some kind of ‘national question’ within the ambit of the sovereign state (see Bélanger and Trudeau, 2007 on differences between Quebec and the rest of Canada), but could also apply to other countries which are highly variegated in their IR institutions, such as the USA (Logan, 2002), or broader socio-economic structure, such as Italy (Locke, 1992).

The challenge ‘from above’, however, is somewhat more fundamental. Some seem to imply that comparativism in an era of transnational influences is inherently ‘methodologically nationalist’ (Beck, 2007; Erne, 2013). Equally, those in academia who are most critical of global neo-liberalism also sometimes fail to appreciate the value of comparative research, with systematic concerns about contemporary capitalism sometimes over-riding any desire to understand differences in the sensitivities and concerns of locally embedded actors, who are seen as marginalised within contemporary capitalism.

This challenge must be met head-on. Comparative research needs to go beyond earlier debates about convergence and divergence, and to question the national closure of many comparative frameworks. Following Peck and Theodore (2007), we argue that global neo-liberalism is ‘variegated’; that is, far from eviscerating the importance of local contexts, it entails uneven, conflictual and contradictory processes of the reconstitution of regulation (Brenner et al, 2010: 184). Its pressures exist in a mutually constitutive relationship with regulatory and social actors at local and national levels. In-depth comparative research in local contexts is therefore vital to understanding the concrete manifestation of these dynamics, and how local actors interpret, realise and sometimes resist them.

Peck (2013) argues that research into local-global relations under contemporary capitalism should meet a number of related criteria. First, it should be *substantivist*, built on ‘an iterative engagement with actually existing real economies, understood in terms of their prevailing patterns of institutionalisation, applying, interrogating, and refining mid-level concepts along the way’ (Peck, 2013: 1553). Second, it should analyse *variegation*, appreciating real socio-economies ‘as combinatory sites of multiple rationalities, interests, and values, rather than as spaces governed by singular and invariant economic laws’ (*ibid*: 1555), and access the constitutively *dialectical* form of the institutionalisation of capitalism in specific places. Finally, in striving to be *comparativist*, it should place ‘socioeconomies within a reflexive spatial-relational frame and place local economic practices, knowledges and imaginaries in conversation with extra-local others’ (*ibid*: 1562).

A comparative research programme following these principles should not be based on a strong assumption of cross-national divergence, or ascribe singular logics to national systems. Arguing for deeper forms of comparativism is not an excuse to simply collect facts in particular societies, downplaying the ways in which contemporary economies are structured by international and transnational forces. Rather, it should access the ways in which globalising capitalism is constituted in particular places. Given that this is an inherently conflictual and dialectical process, it is not possible to develop an adequate understanding of these processes of constitution without accessing the material, ideational and political resources and constraints encountered by locally embedded actors. Comparative research, in other words, should be thought of as a resource in understanding and interrogating the posited effects of transnational forces, of how such forces are co-constituted and realised at local/national levels, and of possibilities for the constitution of resistance and alternatives, rather than an attempt to avoid these questions with an exclusively local-national focus. We now turn to how this aim can be realised in the practice of comparative research in IR/ER.

Comparative industrial and employment relations research: thin versus deep comparisons

Within comparative research, there is a basic underlying tension between two types of approach, which we characterise as ‘thin’ and ‘deep’ approaches.

Thin approaches try to compare cross-sectionally using standardised variables. National social and cultural specificities are often seen here as undesirable empirical noise which somewhat gets in the way of the main objective of establishing relationships between independent and dependent variables in as standardised a way as possible. Such approaches are often based, explicitly or implicitly, on forms of contingency thinking, and try to draw relations between variables ‘above and beyond national specifics and cultural particularities’ (Maurice, 1979: 43). Such variables may be drawn from the standard contingencies of organisational theory (markets, technology, firm size, etc.), or statistical/categorical indicators of national economic, social and political characteristics (e.g. Hall and Gingerich, 2009).

Where it is recognised that countries have rather different national cultures or institutional settings, a thin comparativist will relatively happily ascribe countries to typologies. These are sometimes based on geographical groupings at the level of supranational regions (Scandinavia, Southern Europe, etc.), perceived cultural similarities, or positions in established theoretical frameworks. While such research often has aims beyond the act of cross-national comparison, on the comparative plane this process risks being merely taxonomic: the aim, or in some cases the methodological precept, ‘of assigning national cases to categoric boxes overwhelms any attempt at analysis and explanation’ (Hyman, 2001: 203).

Thin comparativism allows what we would characterise as rather ‘fast’ strategies for the practice of comparative methodology. A fast strategy is characterised by the use of standardised questions, with limited attempts to ensure the comparability of those questions. Where language is an issue, this can be resolved through the ‘back translator’ for the international survey, the interpreter for the qualitative interview. Attempts are made to maximise the comparability of respondents on the assumption that cross-sectionality is possible and desirable: while it may be appreciated that a trade union representative takes a somewhat different form in the UK to France, that a German works council is not the same thing as a Korean one, or that part-time employment means different things in different places, such problems must be ironed out in order to replicate a study internationally.

In short, thin comparisons allow for fast strategies of operationalisation. These can be successful in establishing the relations between variables without going very far in problematising the question of comparability. In some cases, particularly where data from a large number of countries is used, the process does not always involve acquiring particularly deep knowledge of national social contexts. Thin approaches to comparativism, and in particular fast methods of operationalisation, are favoured by the political economy of research. They can respond, on their own terms successfully, to the frequent need for research to cover large numbers of countries due to institutional funder requirements, and to the incentives to make positivistic claims about the relations between standardised variables across as large an n as possible.

The problems of such fast-thin comparisons have been extensively elucidated elsewhere (e.g. Marsden, 1999; Maurice et al, 1986). Briefly, in divorcing variables from the socio-cultural-political contexts in which their concrete meaning is interpreted and realised by actors, cross-sectional research often fails to understand how phenomena or issues are socially constructed. Because of this, thin, cross-sectional, broadly positivist approaches using fast technologies of research, are sometimes contrasted with ‘deep’ approaches more interested in the discontinuities between societies. The latter have an established role in comparative political economy and comparative institutionalism (Djelic and Quack, 2003; Maurice et al, 1986). For example, in the field of international management, Jackson and Deeg argue for an emphasis ‘on *how* and *why* institutions differ across countries, often starting from a “thick” description of institutions...and holistic analysis of institutions within a specific national “case”’ (Jackson and Deeg, 2008: 541).

While it is certainly not necessary to follow a comparative institutionalist framework in order to practice deep comparativism, it is important to have analytical tools to treat the nationally-embedded structures of political economy. In particular, it is important to recognise in some way the interlocking nature of different ‘spheres’ of socio-economic organisation (c.f. Almond and Gonzalez, 2013). This means going beyond the addition of independent or control variables from outside the direct sphere of work and employment (which in principle can be done within contingency-type approaches, see e.g. Pudelko, 2006). It requires developing an analysis of the interactions and interrelations both within and between different potentially relevant spheres (e.g. industrial relations, finance, education, and welfare systems) of national political economies, and how these shape the choices made by workers, managers, firms and the state. The deepest forms of comparativism also tend to pay considerable attention to the historical construction of national systems, in trying to understand the choices of contemporary actors (Jacoby, 2006), and also may go beyond ‘systems’ in interrogating broader socially embedded structures of class, gender, and inter-generational relations (Dufour and Hege, 2002).

The distinction between ‘thin’ and ‘deep’ approaches was once fairly clear (compare Hickson et al, 1979 and Maurice, 1979). In some ways, though, and particularly in industrial relations, the success of comparative institutionalist frameworks has, paradoxically, muddied the waters somewhat. In particular, as approaches based on the comparison of interlocking spheres of societal action have solidified from the positing of discontinuities between national societies and capitalisms, to more codified, and typology-friendly, frameworks, there has been something of a convergence between the two types of approach. In other words, comparative institutionalism has become more accessible to fast strategies of comparison as its focus has sharpened and the variables to be analysed have become somewhat standardised. This has meant that it has become possible to draw upon the varieties of capitalism approach, for example, without much independent enquiry into why particular institutions operate as they do: varieties of capitalism has become something of a script, rather than a technology of comparison. Warnings made by earlier comparativists (e.g. Marsden, 1986) about the dangers of point-for-point comparisons have too often been forgotten, or their implications ignored. In other words, when initially ‘deep’ approaches become internationally standardised, to permit use by ‘fast’ comparativists, they risk becoming somewhat ‘thin’.

The problem, or challenge, is that deep comparativism can only achieve its objectives to the extent that the researcher is confident of having understood the relevant interdependencies and interconnections within and between all the different spheres of social space which shape his/her particular area of interest. This is, in reality, much more complicated than simply reading off the apparent interconnections between spheres as posited by societal institutionalists. For many researchers in IR, this is exacerbated by the fact that commonly used comparative frameworks (e.g. Hall and Soskice, 2001; Whitley, 1999) were originally created to explain international variations in how firms coordinate to create and exploit value; it should not be surprising that the process of spotting potentially relevant interconnections other than those posed by such frameworks is likely to be more complicated the further one’s object of research departs from this. Therefore, while comparative frameworks which set out relevant ‘spheres’ may be helpful as a guide, in many cases the relevant interlockages can only really be discovered at least partly inductively, and may emerge to the researcher in a relatively *ad-hoc* way.

For researchers attempting deep, substantivist comparisons, the question that arises from this is how the researcher manages to access and understand the (multiple and conflicting) dispositions to

action that have currency in guiding action in specific societies. As we highlight below, researchers often gain such understanding at least partially outside the formal research processes found within defences of methodology. It is therefore quite difficult to evaluate, as it is difficult to reconcile with norms of positive science around reliability and replicability (Burawoy, 1998; Katz, 2015). Above all, as Hyman (2001) has argued in the context of cross-national comparison of trade unions, it is a very iterative process which tends to take a long time (hence ‘slow’ comparativism).

Towards slow comparison in industrial relations

This section outlines what a ‘slow’ framework for comparative research would look like. The processes involved in such research are difficult to codify, and many of those who practice slower forms of comparative research often feel obliged to present their research using more orthodox, ‘faster’ forms of writing. In this sense, our presentation of a slow framework is intended both as a starting point for a fuller discussion on the methods used by slow comparativists, and as a defence for such research in a ‘fast’ climate, driven by the short-term execution of projects, rapid publication, and other related pressures. Our discussion of the ‘federal’ nature of projects addresses the conceptual fault line relating to non-comparability indicated in the previous section, while the remaining precepts are more to do with the practice of slower methodologies in IR/ER.

The federal nature of slow comparative projects

Hyman (2001; 2004) has long reflected on the status of comparative IR research. He makes a distinction between nomothetic comparative research – which seeks to create generalisations of an abstract and law-like character, and we would argue, has a tendency to employ fast strategies and risk failing to build a substantivist account of the nature and effects of capitalist variegation – and idiographic research – which seeks to gain a holistic understanding of what is contextually unique (2001: 209) but by implication loses the power of generalisation. He is not alone among comparative methodologists (cf Hantrais, 1999: 95) in implying that the most ‘deep’ forms of research achieve understanding at the cost of making the actual act of cross-national comparison difficult or impossible. This is a real problem, that both the current authors have encountered separately: an attempt at deep comparison becomes, in published form, a single country study which is only implicitly comparative, due to the difficulties involved in presenting structures and actor strategies in different societies as ‘comparable enough’ for comparison to work (Connolly, 2010; Rutherford et al 2017).

Mitigating against this problem requires reference to the foundational ‘apples and oranges’ question of ‘comparing the incomparable’ frequently posed to students of comparative research (cf. Locke and Thelen, 1995). Locke and Thelen argued that conflicts arising from industrial restructuring took different forms in different countries, by showing that particular domains of restructuring and reform might be relatively unproblematic in one society, but cause major conflict in another. As such, a point-for-point comparison of a particular issue would have been misleading in addressing the larger question of how industrial restructuring was shaping industrial conflict across advanced nations. Locke and Thelen show how ‘contextualised comparisons’, as opposed to ‘matched comparisons’, allow us to ‘reframe cross-national comparison so that we are actually comparing across real sticking points’ (2001: 343). Focusing on such ‘sticking points’ – significant potential sources of labour-capital conflict – allow them to find ‘unexpected parallels across cases that the conventional literature sees as very different...(while)...underscoring significant differences between cases typically seen as “most similar”’ (Locke and Thelen, 1995: 338).

Additionally, it is often the case that investigating particular spheres of social and economic organisation in any depth reveals that social structures aimed at achieving particular objectives – or particular ‘strategic action fields’, using the terminology of Fligstein and McAdam (2012) – exist in some places but not in others. For example, in research on foreign direct investment, regional development and social actors led by one of the current authors, while a recognisable ‘field’ of regional development existed in all cases, geographically-specific social features such as local

industrial relations heritage, the existence of nationalist movements, and the structure of ownership of natural resources intervened as key variables in determining whether organised labour was able and willing to take a role in this field, and to shape more ‘coordinated’ and less labour exclusionary forms of regional economic globalisation (Gonzalez et al, 2018). While a comparison of meso-corporatist structures for regional development would make for a very short paper in the most ‘liberal’ economies, failing to gain a deep understanding of the logics behind such structures where they do exist would clearly not make for good comparative research either. In effect, non-comparability is in part accessed through a process of discovery about what is absent, as well as what is present, in specific societies; for the great comparative political historian Benedict Anderson (2016: 16),

(I)n the process of comparative research what you will start to notice, if your ears and eyes are open, are the things you can’t see and hear. You will begin to notice what is not there as well as what is there, just as you will become aware of what is unwritten as well as what is written.

Resolving, or at least mitigating against, the problem of non-comparability therefore requires the slow comparativist to find a means of dancing between the requirement for some degree of meta-comparability (i.e. a thematic unity across countries) and societal specifics at a more granular level. This means that slow comparative research requires moments of confrontation between a general research problematic, on the one hand, and what is going on at a local level, on the other. It is important that these moments of confrontation take place at all stages of research projects, for initial conceptualisation to the reporting stage. Initially, where researchers are not already deeply familiar with the relevant social contexts, it is likely that research questions will be fairly broad, allowing for the emergence of particular fields of social action being more or less relevant in one place than other. While research is ongoing, the existence, or absence, of particular types of action in one place should inform research into what is going on in others, potentially inflecting the nature of fieldwork and leading to a reinterpretation of research questions. Finally, in the writing stage, as per contextualised comparison, what is ‘matched’ for comparison will often reflect findings of importance in each context, alongside an exploration of why a particular sort of action is of more centrality in one society than in another. While allowing local specifics to feed back into an overall international project is likely to create a degree of messiness in relation to the demands of positive science, this approach is likely to be much more practically adequate at a local level, and have greater potential to advance theory which is genuinely internationally applicable, than alternatives in which locally-specific findings are seen as representing national exceptionalism and not allowed to feed back into overall frameworks.

This process tends to challenge, or at least qualify, typologies of societies established *ex ante*. This, we would argue, is a common feature of leading comparative research in IR. For example, Hyman’s framework for union identities (2001:5) challenges the most stereotyped versions of union models as based on one character only, by providing explanation of ‘changes’ and ‘movements’ within his triangle of national union orientations. This framework, which identifies three ideal type trade union identities – market, class and society – and how they are in constant tensions, helps provide ‘transnational’ theoretical concepts that may be used for comparative purposes. Equally, Meardi’s exploration of trade union styles as opposed to models questions existing national typologies of trade unions (Meardi, 2003; see also Meardi, 2011 on cultures of trade unions). He argues that typologies often presuppose stability, coherence and even harmony, whereas focusing on ‘styles’ rather than ‘models’ allows for constant adaptation, change and innovation (2003: 10).

On a more practical level, the idea of ‘federal’ projects might lead some to argue that achieving the types of insight that ‘slow’ comparative research enables might best be done through collective projects in which national researchers simply take responsibility for research in their home countries. However, in practice, we do not think that such a ‘multi-domestic’ approach really solves the problems that positing a slow strategy attempts to deal with. As one prominent social comparative methodologist argues, ‘it is desirable for researchers undertaking comparative studies to have an intimate knowledge of more than one society, their languages and cultures, and this would seem to be almost a prerequisite for embarking on scientifically grounded cross-national research projects adopting the societal approach’ (Hantrais, 1999: 101). This, we would argue, applies to those

performing their national component of collective comparative projects, as well as to those who actively research abroad. A slow comparative project conducted collectively should ideally consist of cross-national collaboration throughout the project process in each of the countries being researched, and be comprised of researchers who have, or seek to develop, significant relevant knowledge of more than one society. This allows confrontation between the assumptions of researchers from different countries investigating the same fields of research (cf. Dufour and Hege, 2002). Involvement of both home-national and foreign researchers in processes of primary data collection permits dialogues with respondents which are of great use in identifying, challenging and interpreting the contextual understanding of all three parties.

While a fully federalised project can feel like a somewhat ‘unattainable ideal’, we argue that it is worth pursuing and agree with Hyman (2001: 223) that ‘through our inadequate attempts to understand the “peculiarities” of “the other”, we can better appreciate our own uniqueness, constructing a basis for a better approximation to truly comparative knowledge’.

Language and related issues

It is difficult to achieve the deep understanding of societies necessary for such federal comparisons without a good understanding of the relevant language(s). Even if research subjects are able and willing to communicate in a *lingua franca*, the societal context does not follow suit. For the great comparativist Benedict Anderson,

When you start to live in a country whose language you understand barely or not at all, you are obviously not in a good position to think comparatively, because you have little access to the local culture... You cannot avoid making comparisons, but these are likely to be superficial and naïve (Anderson, 2016: 15).

There are also likely to be class response biases if research in non-Anglophone countries is conducted in English.

Meardi argues that linguistic issues affect the quality of data achievable in methodologies that rely on interviews or conversations.

Interviewees facing a foreigner have a knowledge advantage: they can assume that the interviewer has little familiarity with the field, and that consequently almost everything can be told...knowledge of the local language allows the heavy interference of an interpreter to be avoided. If they show some familiarity and...links with the country, the risk of being treated as a kind of naïve tourist are reduced (Meardi, 2000: 90).

Speaking the language also allows for ‘slower’ methods that can lead to access to a wider range of social settings within the context of the research. In a piece of research led by one of the authors (Connolly, 2010), speaking French led to both participant and non-participant observation and greater flexibility in choice of methods. In contrast in another piece of research (Connolly et al, 2017), not speaking the Dutch language limited access opportunities and relied on interpreters. Access to the interpretation of meanings and understandings of participants in the latter example was limited in a literal sense by not speaking the language, which then precludes access to trying to interpret literal understandings within a particular context.

Equally, it should go without saying, but unfortunately often does not in the English-dominated international Academy, that it is, to say the least, polite to read the relevant research of academics in the societies that one plans to investigate. As well as supplying important secondary information in relatively standard ways, reflexive reading of such research also permits the development of an understanding of national differences in the framing of social questions (Frege, 2005). This is perhaps particularly important in industrial relations, which ‘is not an internally self-consistent field of study. It is instead a confederacy of competing paradigms...when viewing the empirical world members of different schools [of industrial relations] neither look at nor see precisely

the same things' (Adams, 1983: 509, 526), and where such paradigms are strongly driven by national disciplinary traditions.

Linguistic issues are more obviously present where the countries under comparison use different languages. However we would argue that they are not absent even if this complication is absent. Assuming comparability of meaning of terminology is a mistake to be avoided even in the same language, and this particularly applies if research subjects are likely to depart substantially from standard formal language.

Immersion and methodological implications

This refers to the 'slow' process of accessing the 'common sense' of relevant actors. A slow research strategy places value on time spent in the societies under study to acquire local meanings, and requires fieldwork to be seen as a much more encompassing process than just what happens in formal research settings such as interviews. Leads are often indirect, and valuable evidence can be acquired by informal conversations with relevant (or semi-relevant) people, and simply by developing, on an informal basis, a somewhat ethnographic approach to one's interactions with the wider society. Ways of employing data gathered in relatively opportunistic ways need to be found if the potential of such leads is to be fully deployed.

Meardi's (2013) review of Gumbrell-McCormick and Hyman's (2013) impressive comparative work on trade unions across Western Europe argues that while the authors have collected interviews and crossed 'linguistic and cultural barriers with an unbelievable ease' (p. 468), the voices are mainly from trade union officials. The implication here is that comparative research on trade unions would be 'deeper' if it also managed to access additional voices.

Interestingly, the afterword to the paperback edition of Gumbrell-McCormick and Hyman's work reflects the fact that additional voices were in fact heard; 'We have taken part in trade union training courses, attended congresses, and spoken to members and officials alike, not only in the context of formal research, but also in many different settings and situations' (2018: 232). We would argue that such encounters clearly elevate the truth claims of this research, and that those who do go beyond the formal interview in conducting comparative research should be able to stress this when defending their methodologies.

We would further add that the relevant supplementary voices may not necessarily be exactly the same categories of people in different societies, and that a degree of idiosyncrasy has to be tolerated – and indeed encouraged – in slow comparative research. In other words, a slow comparativist needs to develop an 'always on' mentality, alert to the possibility that valuable background can be acquired in somewhat idiosyncratic ways. A slow comparativist approach, similar to approaches found in ethnographic studies (Mehan, 1979), accepts that all the phases involved in access to the field reveal much information which can become an integral part of the piece of research (Meardi, 2000). Overall, the principle of immersion means that slow comparative research is a much more iterative process than more standard alternatives, and has a relatively high degree of tolerance for variation in and adaptations to formal research methods in different social contexts. Direct equivalences for respondents who may provide crucial data or leads in one context may be difficult or impossible to find in another.

As such, a slow research strategy has obvious similarities with Burawoy's 'extended case method', which allows broad conclusions to be drawn from ethnographic research, and shows how broader forces such as globalisation and neoliberalisation can be studied 'from below' through participating in the lives of those who experience it (see also Edwards, 1992). However, in seeking to compare across societies, slow comparison aims to link particular cases with the larger context, generating better understanding of the impact of macro-processes such as globalisation and neoliberalisation on everyday practice. Second, it provides a methodological bridge between individuals and their collectivities (Hyman, 2004). This leads to a better understanding of how sets of practices and norms are generated in different national and institutional contexts (Murray et al, 2010).

The idea of immersion also links in to debates on participatory and emancipatory research approaches in the area of work and employment (Brook and Darlington, 2013; Stewart and Martinez Lucio, 2017). Brook and Darlington's Participatory Action Research (PAR) advocates that academics

should ‘extend and deepen [their] organic engagement *with* the organised, unorganised, marginalised and unwaged, whether they are in overt struggle or searching for their voices to be heard, as a first step in pursuing social change’ (Brook and Darlington, 2013: 241). Evidently a ‘slower’ approach to research in general is compatible with and useful for PAR, and slow comparativism supports the organic engagement of researchers within different national contexts. Similarly a slow approach is also compatible with forms of action research advocated by Huzzard and Bjorkman (2012), and again as with PAR it allows forms of action research to have greater reach and contribution by being nationally comparative in nature.

Part-alienation and reflexiveness

Following from the immersion precept, it is essential that the researcher develops the capacity to distance him/herself sufficiently from the socialised rationality of their own (or, for that matter, any other) country, ideally before finalising formal research instruments. This process is indispensable if research is to seek to avoid ethnocentrism. Ethnocentrism often comes from an assumption that ‘foreign’ societies/systems somehow *should* follow the logics of the researcher’s home country, or of dominant societies. This was a characteristic of most early comparative industrial relations research, and remains present in some cases. The ‘reverse ethnocentrism’ of internalising the logics of actors in a ‘preferred’ foreign society, or of falling into the classic ethnographer’s trap of ‘going native’, is equally to be avoided, and is something attempts at slow comparison have particularly to guard against. A good slow comparativist needs to develop an understanding of the various social logics relevant to the research questions that s/he is trying to resolve, but needs to inoculate against over-identification. It is difficult to codify how to do this, as it is more of an art than a science, but a degree of ‘alienation’ needs to be developed from a society that the researcher is already very familiar with (i.e. ‘home’ countries), and maintained from ‘foreign’ societies during the process of immersion.

Conclusion

A summary of basic characteristics of the ‘thin’ and ‘deep’ approaches, and the ‘fast’ and ‘slow’ approaches, is presented in Table 1. We acknowledge that the two dimensions of difference here are not entirely binary, rather there is a continuum between thin and deep, and one between fast and slow. Equally, as indicated above, while slow comparativism aims at achieving depth, not all deep comparativists employ slow comparative strategies.

Table 1 about here

We have attempted to make a case for forms of comparative research on work and employment which engage deeply with the societies under study, and to present some basic precepts as to how this might be done in what we term slow strategies of research. We do not carry any illusion that the precepts presented here fully resolve the problems of comparability often encountered by those that take context seriously within comparative research. The tension between acquiring deep contextual understanding, and what we refer to as a ‘meta-comparability’ allowing for generalisation and parsimony is very real, and as Hyman (2001) implies, perhaps not fully resolvable. However we hope that this paper provides a defence for obtaining deep contextual understanding in the context of variegated capitalism, some basic precepts as to how ‘slow’ comparativism might achieve this, and some indications as to how research can acknowledge the tension between comparability and non-comparability without being overwhelmed by it.

This paper was written, not in order to attack other approaches to comparison with different goals than those emphasised here, but rather to defend a form of comparative research which for its successful execution necessitates long-term engagement with the societies under study. This requires space and time which the neo-liberal Academy is increasingly unprepared to offer. As such, this paper is not only intended to encourage individuals to defend and discuss the practice of slower forms of comparison, but also to encourage academics in positions of authority to gain a greater understanding

of these requirements. In their manifesto for slow scholarship, Berg and Seeber (2016) argue that 'slowing down' can be a practice of resistance, which allows for a deepening of understanding rather than a focus on production of marketable knowledge. In this paper we have sought to contribute to these wider sociological debates, and show how we can be slow comparative scholars in practice.

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Table 1: Comparative approaches and strategies

Thin approach

Variable/contingency-driven approach

More interest in transversal knowledge of subject area than in deep understanding of national societies.

Deep approach

Problematizes 'thin' ideas of comparability of standardised variables

Argues for need to understand interlockages between complexes of variables across national societies

More interest in contextual understanding of national society/history/culture

Fast strategy

Standardised questions (both in quantitative and qualitative research), relatively little deviation from methodological approaches used in non-comparative research.

High tolerance of national typologies

Maximise 'superficial' comparability of respondents

Perceives little need to acquire in-depth, on the ground understanding of national social dynamics. Low 'societal reflexivity'

High degree of closure of projects

Slow strategy

Much more iterative process, tolerant of variation in methodology in different societal contexts.

Suspicious of national typologies, seeks to access and evaluate counter-narratives.

Much less concerned with formal comparability of respondents; opportunist approach to data

Sees geographical context as very important, seeks to develop (implicit) ethnography of societies. High 'societal reflexivity'

Low degree of closure of projects