

METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES IN MACRO COMPARATIVE RESEARCH: AN INTRODUCTION

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This special issue of JWSR is the offspring of an ASA Political Economy of the World System session that I organized in 2007. My thanks to Andrew Jorgenson, co-editor of JWSR, who moderated the session and proposed that I put together a special issue on this topic. In turn, I asked Timothy Moran to join me as co-editor of this issue. Tim is one of the foremost quantitative macro-comparative sociologists in the country, and was the discussant on the PEWS panel. Tim provides a summary and discussion of the contributions in the conclusion. As it turns out, only two of the panel presentations are included in this issue. The other two were submitted in response to a general call for papers. All four manuscripts were peer reviewed.

Three of the articles in this issue overlap in ways that might not readily be apparent by their respective titles. Pablo Lapegna's article, "Ethnographers of the World...United? Current Debates on the Ethnographic Study of 'Globalization'," explores the ways in which field studies of individuals and locales can do more than inform our understanding of global processes. Lapegna argues that these studies are necessary to counter the notion that local processes are simply the homogenous outcomes of macro-level dynamics. Lapegna rejects the "local-global" duality, arguing that social organizations at any level, be it a small village or megalopolis, need to be considered in their own right. Ethnographies provide a "view from below" that understands these hierarchical linkages as a dynamic interactive ones, where actors at the local and national levels modify global "projects" in light of area specific conditions and cultures. In the second half of the paper, Lapegna provides a detailed discussion of the current debate surrounding two types of ethnographic study; multisite versus global perspectives. Lapegna does not take sides on this issue, leaving it instead to the reader to navigate these issues.

In "Puzzles in the Comparative Study of Frontiers: Problems, Some Solutions, and Methodological Implications" Thomas Hall considers the role of "frontiers" in macro-comparative research. In Hall's view, frontiers are an inherent characteristic of all world systems, which are constantly expanding, contracting, and interacting with other world systems over time and space. As such, frontiers provide a useful window on the changing dynamics of these relationships. Hall's basic point is that frontiers can provide a useful mechanism for connecting the local and the global, both from the bottom-up and top-down. In other words, the study of frontier social processes can inform world-systemic processes as well as the ways in which world systems analysis can inform local human agency. Hall begins with a discussion of the definition(s) of a "frontier." He first tells us what a frontier is not. It isn't a border or boundary between two countries, nor is it the overlap between two states. The emphasis here is that it is not static or stationary. Rather, they are fundamentally indeterminate or "fuzzy." Hall stresses the active and changing nature of frontiers. His favorite definition is drawn from the metaphor of a biological membrane. Both are selectively permeable in terms of direction, content and quantity.

Hall goes on to discuss in depth the characteristics of frontiers, emphasizing the (world-system) context and scale that determine the nature of these zones of interactions.

Lloyd, Mahutga, and De Leeuw's article on, "Looking Back and Forging Ahead: Thirty Years of Social Network Research on the World-System," is an impressive review of the application of social network analysis (SNA) to world-systems analysis that will undoubtedly find its way onto many graduate student preliminary exam reading lists for its clear and thorough summary of the key concepts, benefits, and drawbacks, to using SNA to empirically study world systems processes. I will certainly add it to ours. LM&D begin by exploring the notion of a "relational-structural" methodology that they argue is particularly useful in studying these global processes. They incorporate into this discussion a comprehensive review of the relevant literature. LM&D close with their own assessment of the future methodological and substantive directions for SNA and world-systems analysis.

So what do these three articles have in common? All of these papers deal with the nature of the local-global relationship. And they all reject the pervasive tendency to understand the "local" as the passive expression of "global" processes. In its place, these authors stress the reciprocal, interactive nature of this dynamic. This is a welcome advance to macro-comparative research in general, and specifically to orthodox world-systems theory.

Salvatore Babones' contribution, "Modeling Error in Quantitative Macro-Comparative Research" will likely be the most controversial article of this issue. Babones highlights a critical and not widely-recognized nor well-appreciated statistical problem with quantitative longitudinal analyses; the misspecification of error in trended data. Babones provides the reader with a clear and comprehensive primer on some of the major problems encountered in quantitative macro-comparative research, focusing specifically on the issue of modeling error in the data that arise from heterogeneity bias and residual autocorrelation. Babones argues that the currently accepted, "hegemonic" methods of dealing with these issues, fixed and random effects panel models, can generate "wildly spurious results." He calls for a return to traditional "difference" models, in which change over time in the dependent variable is regressed on changes in the independent variable. In his critique, Babones boldly calls into question much of the currently published research in quantitative macro-comparative research, a position that is likely to draw a critical response from those who are using these hierarchical models in their work. This is indeed a crucial issue, and it is unlikely that Babones' article will be the final word on this topic. A critical dialogue between proponents and dissenters would be a worthy topic for another special issue of the Journal of World Systems Research.