HOW CAN WE STUDY INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS COMPARATIVELY?

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OVERVIEW

- what comparison is (and is not)
- some key problems
- seeking causal laws?
- or exploring uniqueness?
- institutions and institutionalism
- from variables to conjunctures?
- inconclusive conclusions
WHAT COMPARISON IS (AND IS NOT)

what comparison is:
• the search for robust explanation
• exploring cross-national similarities and differences
• and trends: convergence and divergence

what comparison is not:
• parallel description
• games with datasets
• deracinated taxonomies
• particularistic universalism
SOME KEY PROBLEMS

• small N, many variables
• translation: *traduttore*, *traditore*...
• models of social-scientific explanation
COMPARISON, TRANSLATION, INTERPRETATION

- Biagi: ‘linguistic standardisation due to universal use of English is not always matched by a similarity of structures and functions’
- Steiner: two meanings of interpreting
  - interpretare no è tradurre...
- but interpretation must precede translation
- and translation must precede comparison
SEEKING CAUSAL LAWS?

- Mill: functional equivalent of experimentation: independent and dependent variables
- but: what is a variable (or a constant)?
- even with large N, too many variables?
- ceteris paribus?
- is social causality deterministic?
EXPLORING UNIQUENESS?

- descriptors are context-bound
- object of research is not variables but interrelationships
- understanding ‘societal effects’
- towards contextualised comparisons
- Maurice: la non-comparabilité n’est plus constituée comme limite, elle devient plutôt objet d’analyse
CECI N’EST PAS UN SYNDICAT...

- social foundations of trade unionism
- custom, conviction, coercion – or selective incentives ?
- non-members: with us or against us [closed shop]
- syndicalisme des militants...
- trade union ≠ syndicat ?
INSTITUTIONS AND INSTITUTIONALISM

• Schregle: ‘we must compare functions and not institutions’
• but what is an institution – or a function?
• varieties of ‘new institutionalism’: institutional regimes
• complementarity, path-dependence and change
FROM VARIABLES TO CONJUNCTURES?

- focus on configurations
- complex linkages of antecedents and outcomes
- probabilistic argument
- QCA
- fuzzy sets
INCONCLUSIVE CONCLUSIONS

• we must escape idealised conceptions of scientific method
• die Grenzen meiner Welt bedeuten die Grenzen meiner Sprache
• comparability is not given: it must be constructed
• comparison as bricolage
DIE GRENZEN MEINER WELT...

- the fatal attraction of superficial similarity
- to communicate across societies, we must understand our failures to communicate
- concepts must capture
  - difference-within-similarity
  - similarity-despite-difference