

Concise Encyclopedia of Comparative Sociology

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Edited by

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Preface

This *Concise Encyclopedia of Comparative Sociology* is the first of its kind for the discipline of *comparative sociology* and is intended to take its place among several other encyclopedias and handbooks of sociology each having their own specific foci. Although an awareness of the need for more widely adopting a comparative approach to sociological study and research has been growing rapidly in the sociological community, very few guide books are available for those who would like to pursue or gain a better understanding of this approach, with teaching materials being especially rare. This motivated us to assemble the collection of essays presented in this *Concise Encyclopedia of Comparative Sociology*.

One of the main goals of this work is to communicate effectively the current state of knowledge in comparative sociology to an educated lay public. The most likely users of this encyclopedia are undergraduate and graduate students at early stages of inquiry, and persons in other fields who desire an introduction to one or more topics in comparative sociology (as well as faculty members who would like to know more about what comparative sociologists are doing in sociology so that they might better assess the achievements and the promise of this approach).

This *Concise Encyclopedia of Comparative Sociology* is divided into six broad areas:

1. Theoretical and Methodological Issues in Comparing Societies,
2. Comparative Historical Sociology,
3. Comparing Institutions and Social Structures,
4. Comparing Social Processes,
5. Comparing Nation States and World Regions, and
6. Biographies of Exemplary Comparative Sociologists.

Assembling this encyclopedia was a wide-ranging and sometimes daunting task. We were, as always, constrained by space and time. Our Editorial Board members were of immense assistance in narrowing the scope of this work yet nonetheless maintaining adequate coverage of these broad topic areas. They were also especially helpful in identifying and recruiting authors specializing in the many topics. There are no doubt those who would argue that we have omitted or overlooked some topics; however, again, the space and time considerations demanded a realistic approach to the task.¹ But the end result serves our purpose and intent well: 57 essays all written by distinguished comparative sociological scholars. We believe that these fairly constitute what we would call very good coverage of the field, in their readability, representativeness, and authoritativeness.

The biographical section contains 41 biographies of both classical and contemporary sociologists who have made major contributions to comparative sociology. Most of the biographies of living sociologists are autobiographies. Biographies of sociologists no longer living were written either by close colleagues or scholars highly familiar with their lives and work. Choosing which sociologists to include was an imperfect process. Very few would take exception to the inclusion of such luminaries as Marx, Weber, Durkheim, Reinhard Bendix, Immanuel Wallerstein, Seymour Martin Lipset, Michael Mann, Barrington Moore, Charles Tilly, or Randall Collins, but there will no doubt be disagreement on many others who might have been included had it been possible to have a larger number.

For those not familiar or only vaguely familiar with comparative sociology, it behooves us to explain a little bit about the field, and in so doing to justify the need for a large encyclopedia about the discipline.

Sociology's founding fathers were all comparative researchers. Karl Marx, Max Weber, Emile Durkheim, Alexis de Tocqueville, to name just a few, all committed themselves to the comparative method, whether they studied roles, institutions, societies, nations, cultures, groups or organizations

¹ For organizational reasons beyond our control we regret that three specific topic areas were omitted: Comparing Societies—Quantitative Methods; Medieval Sociology; and Justice and Law.

(which, for simplicity, we aggregate here as “social entities”). Durkheim, for example, sought to find a general “law” which would explain national and occupational variations in suicide rates. These and other early eminent scholars in sociology all studied societies, cultures and groups to describe their unique or distinctive properties and their similarities and differences, in an effort to identify what might be universal attributes (i.e., to identify what might be true of all social entities). Durkheim, for example, was looking for such a “general law” to explain suicide rates across nations, religions, occupations and other status groups. Even de Tocqueville’s single-nation enduring masterpiece, *Democracy in America*, involved comparing and contrasting what he saw in the United States with what he observed in Europe.

Hence the major aim of comparative sociological research is to identify similarities and differences between and among social entities. To some scholars, the term “comparative sociological research” is strictly limited to comparisons of social indicators and institutions across nations (also known as “cross-national research”), but other scholars prefer to widen the scope to include comparison of many different types of social and/or cultural entities, while yet others use the term to encompass comparisons of subcultures or other social substrata either within or across nation-states or other cultural and social entities and their boundaries.

The ultimate aim of comparative sociological research is to develop concepts and generalizations based upon identified similarities and differences among the social entities being compared, especially in their behavior (including ways of thinking and acting), in their values and ideologies, and in the intrinsic elements of their social structures. This serves as a means of enhancing one’s understanding and awareness of other social entities. Given these findings, then, comparative sociological research can support and contribute to theory formulation or reformulation. Such comparative research ensures replicability of social research and concepts across different social groups and in so doing facilitates the application of generalizations across social groups. Comparative research can also identify and explain unique patterns in particular social entities or their trajectories.

Comparative sociology and comparative sociological research have much to do with perspective. Researchers in one nation need a means to adopt and understand the perspectives of their counterparts in other nations. As the world becomes ever more globalized, the need for such understanding should be clear: national policies need to consider and encompass the needs of global partners in any way affected by policy implementation. Thus another key task of comparative sociology and comparative sociological research is to support policymaking, principally at national and transnational levels. Do policymakers have the necessary perspective to assure such cooperation?

If, as globalization would seem to have implied, there were to be eventual social and cultural convergence in the world, comparative sociological research would wane as there would be fewer distinct social entities to compare. Yet, in most regards, whether in social systems, economic systems, politics, or religion, we find that the world continues to revel in diversity, and that earlier predictions of universal convergence in secularism, state centralization, and culture have not been realized. There thus remains much variation in the world and comparative sociological research promises to further explain this to us and to further enhance our understanding and awareness of one another.

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January 2014

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