

## Book Review

Jan Berting, Felix Geyer and Ray Jurkovich, *Problems in International Comparative Research in the Social Sciences*. Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1979.

This book presents a collection of papers first discussed at a symposium on theoretical and methodological problems of international comparative research organized by the Dutch UNESCO commission in April 1978. Forty participants from eight nations – Nordic countries not among them – attended the meeting. In the opinion of the organizers, little attention had been devoted to theoretical and methodological problems in international comparative research, an omission they found somewhat surprising given the interest of the founding fathers of the social sciences – Marx, Durkheim, Weber – who were not only strongly comparative in their orientation, but took a particularly keen interest in theoretical and methodological questions. Such an observation may be valid for several fields of research, but as a general characteristic of comparative research it appears harsh.

In order to stimulate specific and concrete discussion, the symposium was organized around two relatively related research areas: race relations and individual social mobility. Perhaps the overly critical stance of the authors would have been milder if topics in comparative politics or in comparative macro-sociology had been on the agenda.

Participants were expected to provide views on the state of international comparative research in the social sciences; the main problems encountered; the relationship between comparative research and the social science program of UNESCO; and how to enhance the quality and the usefulness of international comparative research.

The book may be said to offer three types of contributions spread across 10 chapters: critical appraisals of comparative studies of race and ethnicity, and of comparative social mobility; critical reviews of some theoretical and methodological problems in general; and a contribution on the significance of an infrastructure for international comparative research.

All three types of contributions can be recommended in this book, though some chapters will probably attract greater interest among sociologists – or even among only some groups of sociologists – than among political scientists. We consider this to be true for some of the critical assessments of studies of race relations and mobility. But one of the contributions of this kind is worthy of special mention for a wider community: the article by David Schweitzer on 'Comparative Social Mobility: Problems of Theory, Epistemology, and Quantitative Methodology'. This is

## Book Review

Jan Berting, Felix Geyer and Ray Jurkovich, *Problems in International Comparative Research in the Social Sciences*. Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1979.

This book presents a collection of papers first discussed at a symposium on theoretical and methodological problems of international comparative research organized by the Dutch UNESCO commission in April 1978. Forty participants from eight nations – Nordic countries not among them – attended the meeting. In the opinion of the organizers, little attention had been devoted to theoretical and methodological problems in international comparative research, an omission they found somewhat surprising given the interest of the founding fathers of the social sciences – Marx, Durkheim, Weber – who were not only strongly comparative in their orientation, but took a particularly keen interest in theoretical and methodological questions. Such an observation may be valid for several fields of research, but as a general characteristic of comparative research it appears harsh.

In order to stimulate specific and concrete discussion, the symposium was organized around two relatively related research areas: race relations and individual social mobility. Perhaps the overly critical stance of the authors would have been milder if topics in comparative politics or in comparative macro-sociology had been on the agenda.

Participants were expected to provide views on the state of international comparative research in the social sciences; the main problems encountered; the relationship between comparative research and the social science program of UNESCO; and how to enhance the quality and the usefulness of international comparative research.

The book may be said to offer three types of contributions spread across 10 chapters: critical appraisals of comparative studies of race and ethnicity, and of comparative social mobility; critical reviews of some theoretical and methodological problems in general; and a contribution on the significance of an infrastructure for international comparative research.

All three types of contributions can be recommended in this book, though some chapters will probably attract greater interest among sociologists – or even among only some groups of sociologists – than among political scientists. We consider this to be true for some of the critical assessments of studies of race relations and mobility. But one of the contributions of this kind is worthy of special mention for a wider community: the article by David Schweitzer on 'Comparative Social Mobility: Problems of Theory, Epistemology, and Quantitative Methodology'. This is

a strongly critical, but admirably thorough review of social mobility studies since the now classic treatise by Sorokin in 1927. Most studies are criticized for being ahistorical, atheoretical, and ethnocentric. Scholars in this field of comparative research are advised to explore alternative theoretical approaches and methodological procedures; to draw on the important mobility-relevant perspectives of historians and scholars of other disciplines; to draw on firm macrosociological thought and historical knowledge; and to collect and analyse new types of data, for example documentary materials and biographic life histories. Schweitzer presents an exhaustive bibliography of 193 entries.

Among the second type of contributions we should like to draw attention to Jan Berting's two chapters, one on 'A Framework for the Discussion of Theoretical and Methodological Problems in the Field of International Comparative Research in the Social Sciences', and the other on 'What is the Use of International Comparative Research?' The first of these offers a classification of main types of international comparative research plus an impressive inventory of the major approaches in sociology and their characteristics in the field of international comparative research. Berting's second article gives an assessment of ideas presented at the meeting, discusses the main trends in comparative research, and suggests some desirable and necessary developments. The need for more *theory* in comparative research is emphasized strongly, and among recommendations for future research are listed the desirability of restricting comparative research to *some* units only, carefully selected with respect to the problem at hand; the desirability of avoiding simple mass comparisons of variables; and the desirability of starting comparative research on the basis of what is known on a national level before building general constructions. These recommendations appear generally sound, but we may add that the strategy of research is dependent upon a number of other factors, such as for example: what is the state of (accumulated) knowledge in a field, about a phenomenon?; how good, and well documented, are the data bases for various nations (societies, social systems)?; what is the theoretical question to be pursued through a comparative, empirical study?; and how will the study be organized and undertaken?

These questions lead us into the third type of contributions to the book: the topic of creating an infrastructure for international comparative research. Several authors make passing references to the need for infrastructural development, but the chapter by Gerhild Framheim and Stephen C. Mills, 'Infrastructure – The Third Element in International Comparative Research' deals explicitly with this topic. They give an appraisal of the 15-year activities of the Vienna Centre and review the major and truly significant international research projects organized and coordinated by the Centre. The Vienna Centre has played an important role in promoting international research. We may add that opportunities for improved international comparative research are likely to multiply in the years ahead due to the computer revolution and the data archive movement. The book lacks an assessment of the increasing importance of these developments for the establishment of an infrastructure. A number of data-archives now exist throughout Europe and the USA. These archives perform vital data services for the social science research community, by collecting, documenting, storing, and retrieving more and more kinds of information. An international organization, *International Federation of Data Organizations*, was set up a few years ago to coordinate and systematize data

generation activities. For example, this organization decided last spring to take a major initiative for the development of joint data bases for regional analysis and computer cartography in Europe. (For a report on this initiative, see *European Political Data Newsletter*, No. 35, June 1980: pp. 22–31.) There is also an active Committee of European Social Science Data Archives (CESSDA).

There is reason to believe that both of these organizational developments, and large cooperative projects like Viewdata and Euronet, will aid efforts to strengthen the systematization of different types of information. We should also be aware that the development of data archives not only serves the needs of quantitatively oriented social scientists: more and more qualitative information, more and more documents and texts, will be made machine-readable and can be retrieved on mini-machines. (For an assessment of the importance of the archival movement, see Stein Rokkan, Introduction to *ECPR News Circular*, No. 33, March 1979, and Stein Rokkan 'Data Services in Western Europe', *American Behavioral Scientist*, Vol. 19, No. 4, March/April 1976, pp. 443–454.)

But not all problems in international comparative research are solved by this infrastructure development in itself. A well-known problem to any 'comparativist' is the one of comparability of data and indicators across nations and systems. Such problems must be dealt with systematically in every single international comparative research project. Efforts to increase communication between data archive personnel and scholars involved in international comparative research would serve this purpose and should be stimulated. And we have seen that a number of encouraging signs in this direction have appeared over the last ten years in Europe – through the Vienna Centre, UNESCO-ISSC, ECPR, CESSDA, IFDO, and through other channels. We also see hope for future international comparative research in the fact that in 1980 a far greater number of social scientists – political scientists in particular – are trained for such research than was the case ten years ago. But we can easily agree with the authors of this book that more steps should be taken to train new generations of scholars through exchange programs and training seminars. They also suggest that a handbook of problems in international comparative research should be made – an idea worth developing. In this connection it should be mentioned that several data archives are heavily involved in the production of teaching packages and workbooks, tools which will be most useful for teaching purposes and which will also introduce users to many of the problems of comparative research. In Scandinavia, it is primarily the Norwegian Social Science Data Services which are engaged in such projects.

The book on *Problems in International Comparative Research in the Social Sciences* does not seem to be fully aware of all the different efforts made to improve on the scope and quality of comparative research, and efforts to improve the training of new generations of students to become able comparativists. We take this to be the result of its fairly narrow focus on research in the fields of race relations and social mobility. But the book offers comprehensive critical reviews of the state of research in these fields and highlights a number of general problems involved in comparative research. We suspect that sociologists rather than political scientists will find the book worth reading, but every social scientist will benefit from reading it.

Stein Kuhnle  
University of Bergen