

Why and how time matters? The case for open-ended causality on comparative historical research

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Abstract

The paper argues in favour of taking time, timing and sequence seriously in social research and highlights existing challenges for comparative historical research. The aim of this paper is to analytically and empirically unfold the process of institutional change and the power imbalances among key actors for the development of pension systems in three countries. It compares both at an aggregated (nominal) and disaggregated (within case) level, and analyses the development of pension systems in Germany, UK, and Sweden.

The paper follows a diachronic analysis (Hay 2001) that renders time and sequence as part of the empirical research and retains the path of pension development as open-ended. The exploration of both successful as well as rejected attempts to trigger institutional change allows us to empirically explore 'what is possible' but also 'what else is possible.' In doing so, the paper draws upon 'pattern matching' procedures (Mahoney 2003) that allows researchers to put theoretical derived assumptions, into empirical test (Hall 2003) but also demonstrates that a diachronic approach is able to identify the role of neglected actors from welfare state theory, e.g. financiers.

The paper concludes with a discussion of the challenges that stem from shifting levels of aggregation; essentially how cross-case comparisons transforms what is a case since in diachronic analysis, the case is not anymore the 'unified pension system' but essentially attempts to trigger institutional change. The challenge that stems from the effort to render time as part of empirical research is essentially how can we identify commonalities across attempts for institutional change at different institutional contexts. The paper offers two suggestions regarding how processes of institutional change can be part of a cross-case comparative analysis. The first draws from Mill's methods and the second, and more consistent, utilises governance as a tool for comparative cross-case analysis.

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