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"It is quite evident that anyone who is forced to rely on translations, and furthermore on the use and evaluation of monumental, documentary, or literary sources, has to rely himself on a specialist literature which is often highly controversial, and the merits of which he is unable to judge accurately. Such a writer must make modest claims for the value of his work."

—Max Weber

"NEW" DIRECTIONS IN COMPARATIVE AND HISTORICAL SOCIOLOGY (PART II)

This is the second part in a series on new directions in comparative and historical work that offers a glance at the rich and exciting field of on-going sociological research with a comparative and/or historical orientation. Featured are essays by John Boli and Francesca Guerra-Pearson.

GLOBAL HISTORICAL COMPARATIVE RESEARCH



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Comparative historical research has usually taken countries as the units of comparison. Most commonly, the investigator studies processes, events, or institutional sectors in two or more countries, comparing and contrasting the cases. In the best of such work, the result is a conditionalized general explanation for a reasonably well defined set of historical patterns in the countries at issue. While this approach inordinately reifies national units and unrealistically treats them as undergoing more or less autonomous developments, we all know many works of this sort that have been highly illuminating for the sociological imagination.

When it comes to global (transnational, international, or supranational) change and development, however, nations as units are often irrelevant or distracting. Several organizational populations operate at the global or regional transnational level, and the reality they confront –and help manufacture– is far less nation- or state-centric than conventional comparative analysis implicitly assumes. For two of these populations, international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) and transnational corporations (TNCs), nations and states are simply two of the many types of entities with which they interact. Not infrequently, they view states in particular as hindrances or barriers to their success, too important to be ignored but difficult to influence in desired ways. Even for intergovernmental organizations (IGOs), which are constituted as essentially state-centric bodies, individual states are often mostly a bother. States push their particularistic views and interests in ways that interfere with IGO efforts to establish and promulgate rules and models of global governance that are couched in universalistic terms and intended to promote systemic rather than specific goods.

A substantial body of recent research, including some of my own efforts, has shown that we ignore global social reality and its constitutive organizational populations to our peril, even if our primary aim is to understand the historical trajectories of countries or states (Boli and Thomas 1997, Meyer et al. 1997; Keck and Sikkink 1998; Risse-Kappen 1995; Smith et al. 1997). Many of the phenomena that are normally treated as country-specific are better conceptualized as transnational or global processes, not as a category of national processes that are similar in some ways and different in others. Global conceptualization better accounts, among other things, for the astonishing simultaneity of social movements (for women's rights, environmental protection, gay rights, ethnic and indigenous identities), changes in state activities (welfare programs, support of scientific research, population control policies), the

expansion of rationalized forms of socialization and individuality (mass schooling, psychotherapy, consumerism), and so on. The volume of INGO sectoral studies I edited with George Thomas (Boli and Thomas 1999) demonstrates the importance of global movements and organizations for a wide range of activities that normally are analyzed as largely independent processes occurring in numerous countries.

In shifting to the transnational level, comparative research takes on a new character. Explaining variation across cases is still important, but more fundamental is the explanation of similarity, that is, why a given type of historical change sweeps through the world at a particular time. The emphasis lies on grappling with the cultural and institutional, as well as economic and political, conditions of world society that can account for sweeping change. Analysis turns to comparisons of the 'state of the world' at successive time points, with comparisons among national or other units becoming a matter of understanding differential responses to or engagement with the larger systemic changes that frame the behavior of these subunits of world society.

To illustrate how this sort of research can be conducted, I here provide a sketch of my current project with graduate student Donjah Hartsuijker, "World Culture and Transnational Corporations." Our primary objective is to investigate the impact of global trends on the structure, activities, and self-presentation of TNCs. The time span of the study is roughly the last three decades, and we are evaluating the impact of such world-cultural changes as environmentalism, feminism, human rights ideology, individualism, egalitarianism, accounting standardization, and progress-oriented rationalization.

Our study treats TNCs differently from most of the literature. Usually, transnational corporations are conceived as powerful, aggressive, unprincipled, and self-directed actors. They are the embodiment of global capitalism, driven by (and creating) the competitive pressures of the world economy. Their enormous resources are seen as imbuing them with great capacity to influence other actors in the global system, particularly states and IGOs. We seek not so much to challenge this established view of TNCs as to highlight a different perspective on their action and structure. Drawing on the literature on organizational environments, especially the neo-institutional perspective (Powell and DiMaggio 1991, Meyer and Scott 1992, Meyer 1994), we stress that TNCs are subject to influences from the larger cultural and structural milieu in which they are embedded. In the case of TNCs, this milieu is peculiarly global in scope – TNCs see themselves as global actors whose identities and operations are not strongly associated with any particular national units. We therefore argue that, while TNCs are certainly powerful actors in some respects, they also are subject to the demands and cultural fashions of their global milieu. Systematic study of TNC behavior should reveal the impact of global trends and fashions on TNCs as 'receivers' rather than initiators of change.

In our work, my colleagues and I conceive of the global milieu as a 'world culture' that is embodied first and foremost in INGOs, secondarily in IGOs. We have charted some of the core elements of world culture through an examination of the structure and operations of INGOs and IGOs, identifying such principles as universalism, egalitarian individualism, and world citizenship (see also Robertson 1992, Lechner 1989).

In our current research, we will analyze several hundred TNCs with information dating back to the early 1970s. Sources of information include corporate annual reports and, for current data, Internet sites. We will trace long-term trends of TNC adoption of environmental concerns, equal opportunity policies, international accounting standards, and so on, and evaluate explanatory models for variations in conformity with these trends. The results of this study will reveal the workings of the global frame within which nations, TNCs, and other entities operate. The main advantage of this approach is that knowledge of the larger frame will also improve our understanding of the particular historical trajectories of nations and other units, thereby also making conventional comparative analysis more revealing.

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MEASURING THE MEANING OF CHARITABLE ORGANIZATIONS THROUGH ANALYSES OF THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT

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I study organizational culture through comparative-historical analyses of buildings to understand how organizational forms, from the time of organizational founding, enact new visions and affect social structures. I examine how organizational struggles over space influenced, constrained, and/or enabled the process of institutionalization, specifically how relations of power including conflicts over religion, race/ethnicity, class, and gender are historically inscribed within the social organization of space and are embodied in the built environment through chosen architectural styles. My data (Guerra-Pearson 1998, 1999) are derived from archival documents and primary sources about almost 100 charitable, moral and benevolent organizations operating in NYC from 1770-1920. I constructed a genealogy or life history of each organization's built environment from the date of its founding. The data set includes all known property, building (including adaptive and purpose-built alterations), and spatial layout arrangements over time, as well as pictorial representations (engravings, lithographs, photographs) of most of the buildings. I am analyzing this data set with specially-designed programs written for SAS (modifications and expansions of the earlier programs of Franzosi & Mohr 1997; Guerra-Pearson 1998, 1999; Mohr, 1992, 1994; Mohr & Duquette, 1997; Mohr & Guerra-Pearson, in press) using a variety of content analytic, time series, and spatial analysis methodologies.

With few exceptions, the majority of charitable organizations in NYC first adapted to existing built space before relocating at a later time to larger adaptive space or specially designed buildings. Organizational adaptation can be found in descriptions such as "a basement having been hired," "an upper floor," "some rooms," "a temporary building," "a hired house," "an inconvenient hired building," "a fine old family mansion," "one of the rooms of City Hall," "old wooden buildings," or "the session room of the Brick Presbyterian Church" (see, e.g., Richmond 1872). While in adaptive space, organizations often remodeled and expanded, for example, "mansard roof enlargements," "a rear addition," or "building adjoining was rented and fitted up" (see, e.g., Richmond, 1872) before relocating, quite frequently, to other adaptive buildings within a short period of time due to the desire and need for larger, more modern quarters. Not surprisingly, women and minority-affiliated charitable organizations often had great difficulty renting space due to discrimination and prejudice and spent more time in older, dilapidated buildings during their periods of forming.

Charitable organizations that stayed in the same adaptive space over long periods of time were most likely unable to expand their social services unless they expanded outward by incorporating branches in other locations. Organizations that relocated a number of times, each time moving into larger and perhaps newer facilities, more often experienced organizational growth, likely to increase their chances of institutionalization.

In the nineteenth century an organization's level of institutionalization was largely measured in its movement from existing/adaptive space to purpose-built space and in its chosen architectural styles. Over time, recognizable styles (and the use of well-known architects) marked charitable organizations as legitimate and often increased their life chances. One brief example of an organization's desire for purpose-built space can be found in the opening paragraph of the Twentieth Annual Report of the Society for the Relief of Half-Orphan and Destitute Children in New York City (1856). In this report, the Managers announced their plans to erect "a commodious new building" and stated that their orphanage "may with propriety be called one of the established Institutions of this city":

It has passed through the struggles of infancy, the inexperience of youth, and is now prepared, by the maturity it has attained, for more enlarged operations and extensive usefulness. The novelty of a new enterprise has worn off; its founders have grown gray in service. Its humble, old-fashioned front looks dull and unimposing beside the tall, ornamented facades of many of our public buildings (5).

Building changes also reveal patterns of pre-institutional isomorphic spatial adaptations (e.g., the incorporation of new kinds of rooms such as committee rooms and visiting parlors), religious differences in service provision (e.g., classification and segregation), and urban development/redevelopment patterns (e.g., favorable city land grants over potter's fields). Comparative-historical analyses of the built environment offers new insights into the development, differentiation, and institutionalization of charitable organizational forms as well as providing a rich source of data on poverty classifications, legislative reforms, regulatory bodies, subsidies, public-private partnerships and social policy.

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