

Nominal, Ordinal, and Narrative Appraisal in Macrocausal Analysis¹

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Macrocausal analysis is often characterized as following only a single strategy of causal inference. In fact, however, at least three different techniques are used: nominal, ordinal, and narrative strategies of causal assessment. Focusing on recent works of comparative history, this article presents an evaluation of the strengths and limitations of each strategy. In addition, it considers the trade-offs involved in combining two or more strategies. Finally, the article discusses the role of scholarly tastes and skills, the research question, and ongoing research cycles in shaping the methodological approach selected by investigators.

Since the publication of pioneering works of comparative history by scholars such as Barrington Moore (1966), Reinhard Bendix (1964, 1978), Charles Tilly (1967, 1975), and Theda Skocpol (1979), comparative-historical analysis has expanded to become a well-established research tradition within sociology. Yet, recent works from this tradition have attracted far less attention than the breakthrough studies of the 1960s and 1970s. Contemporary methodological critiques of comparative-historical analysis continue to focus on studies from the earlier generation (e.g., Lieberson 1991; Kiser and Hechter 1991), and comparative-historical researchers continue to look almost exclusively to the older studies for methodological guidance. This neglect of much of the best contemporary scholarship has contributed to a loss of forward momentum within the comparative-historical research tradition (see Katznelson 1997, p. 84).

The present article offers a methodological evaluation of recent comparative-historical work. It does so by developing a typology of different

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strategies of causal appraisal based on a methodological reassessment of an older work: Theda Skocpol's *States and Social Revolutions* (1979). Despite the tendency of many scholars (including Skocpol herself) to characterize *States and Social Revolutions* as following only one basic strategy of causal appraisal, the book's explanatory argument is in fact derived from a complex mix of three different strategies. Skocpol explicitly identifies one of these strategies, what might be called causal appraisal based on *nominal comparison*, and this technique has received the most commentary and debate. But two other types of causal appraisal are also used by Skocpol: *ordinal comparison* and *narrative analysis*. Each of these three strategies represents a *different* technique that can be used for assessing the *same* causal relationship. Likewise, each of the strategies embodies its own characteristic strengths and weaknesses.

The relative merits and shortcomings of nominal, ordinal, and narrative strategies have yet to be explored in the literature on comparative-historical methods. Furthermore, methodologists have yet to analyze the *interplay* among these strategies and the diverse ways in which they have been *combined* in empirical research. As a consequence, we currently have a very poor understanding of the alternative methods of causal inference used by contemporary comparative-historical researchers. This article seeks to improve our understanding by systematically assessing both the trade-offs involved in using nominal, ordinal, or narrative appraisal and the trade-offs involved in combining two or all three of these strategies. As we shall see, each individual strategy has distinctive strengths and weaknesses but so too do different combinations of strategies. Recent works of comparative history offer excellent examples for illustrating the relative merits of both individual strategies and different combinations of them.

This article focuses specifically on different strategies of causal inference, and all of the works examined below fall within the broad logic of comparative history that Skocpol and Somers (1980) call "macro-causal analysis." In this logic, the analyst selects a small number of cases (often nation states) for investigation and moves back and forth between theory and history in an effort to identify the causes of a clearly identified outcome.² The article does not focus on alternative logics of comparative history discussed by Skocpol and Somers. For example, it does not examine works that adopt general theoretical frameworks that are then applied to cases (as in Skocpol and Somers's "parallel demonstration of theory")

² Thus, macrocausal analysis is best understood as having both inductive and deductive features (see Skocpol 1979, p. 39; Skocpol and Somers 1980, p. 182; Stryker 1996, pp. 310–13; and Goldstone 1997, pp. 112–13).

approach), such as recent rational-choice and game-theoretic works within the comparative-historical tradition (e.g., Cohen 1994; Levi 1988, 1997).³ The article likewise does not focus on works that derive causal inferences primarily through statistical analyses of large numbers of cases, such as many historically oriented network analyses (see Emirbayer and Goodwin [1994] for a review). Rather, this article is about the methodological techniques used by analysts working within the macrocausal research tradition. The diversity within this research tradition—not yet explicated in the literature—warrants analysis in its own right.

Finally, this article concentrates on methodological procedures that are actually used by practicing macrocausal analysts. The article does not examine hypothetical strategies of causal investigation; for example, it does not focus on strategies of inference that require interval or ratio data precisely because this type of data is not typically used in macrocausal analysis.⁴ Nor does it consider many ontological and epistemological issues addressed in the philosophy of social science. Philosophical excavation of basic assumptions can lead one to raise important issues, but such excavation can also lead one to lose sight of key methodological distinctions that directly influence the actual practice of sociological research. This article thus largely brackets questions of underlying ontology and epistemology in an effort to better understand the specific methodological procedures used by macrocausal analysts.

NOMINAL, ORDINAL, AND NARRATIVE APPRAISAL IN SKOCPOL'S WORK ON REVOLUTIONS

No work of comparative history has received more methodological scrutiny than Skocpol's *States and Social Revolutions* (1979). Little consensus has emerged, however, on the methods of causal assessment employed by Skocpol. Indeed, at least three different understandings are present in the literature. First, Skocpol herself asserts that she uses J. S. Mill's method of agreement and method of difference to identify the causes of social revolution in France, Russia, and China. As a consequence, much debate over the book has centered on the usefulness of Mill's methods for mac-

³ Rational-choice and game-theoretic approaches are of course not the only general theories used by historical sociologists. For example, Mann's (1986, 1993) application of a "sources of power" framework to world history might be viewed as employing a general theory to historical investigation.

⁴ These more fine-grained levels of measurement may be highly desirable to comparative-historical researchers who seek to employ a general theory or who desire to use statistical techniques of causal evaluation. However, the variables used by macrocausal analysts generally refer to large processes and structures that cannot be easily conceptualized as interval or ratio categories in a small-*N* research context.

rosocial inquiry (Nichols 1986; Skocpol 1986; Burawoy 1989; Lieberman 1991, 1994; Savolainen 1994). Second, Jack Goldstone (1997) argues that the method of agreement and the method of difference “are not used by comparative case-study analyses” (p. 108). He suggests it is “extremely unfortunate that . . . Theda Skocpol has identified her methods as Millian, or inspired by Millian logic. In fact, in many obvious ways, her methods depart sharply from Mill’s canon” (p. 109). Goldstone maintains that Skocpol’s methods follow an alternative logic in which explanatory variables take on varying levels across cases and combine together in differing ways to produce the same outcome.

Finally, William Sewell (1996*b*) argues that Skocpol attempts to use Millian methods, but this effort is a failure. He writes that “it is remarkable, in view of the logical and empirical failure of [Skocpol’s use of Mill’s methods], that her analysis of social revolutions remains so powerful and convincing” (p. 260). According to Sewell, what makes Skocpol’s argument successful is her effective use of historical narrative. “The ‘proof’ [of her argument] is less in the formal logic than in the successful narrative ordering of circumstantial detail. The true payoff of Skocpol’s comparative history, then, is not rigorous testing of abstract generalizations but the discovery of analogies on which new and convincing narratives of eventful sequences can be constructed” (p. 262).⁵

In this section, I argue that the lack of consensus over Skocpol’s methodology grows out of her use of at least three different strategies of causal appraisal. Different commentators have focused on only one particular strategy and thus have reached divergent conclusions: Skocpol and most of her critics focus on nominal comparison, Goldstone’s observations point to Skocpol’s use of ordinal comparison, and Sewell’s commentary highlights the importance of narrative appraisal in Skocpol’s argument.⁶

Nominal Comparison

Causal assessment in comparative-historical analysis often takes place by making nominal comparisons across cases. Nominal comparison involves the use of categories that are mutually exclusive and collectively exhaustive. Mill’s (1974) methods of agreement and difference, the most similar and most different systems designs (Przeworski and Teune 1970, pp. 31–39; Lijphart 1971, 1975), and Boolean algebra (Ragin 1987) are the most

⁵ Burawoy (1989, p. 771; his emphasis) makes an almost identical argument: “Were it not for [Skocpol’s] rich and compelling treatments of revolutionary process her book would never have received its well-deserved acclaim. This virtue exists *despite*, not because of, her declared method.”

⁶ Goldstone (1997, pp. 112–13) also discusses Skocpol’s use of narrative analysis.

important examples of methods based on nominal comparison. Each of these methods is fundamentally designed to locate the causes of an outcome by eliminating potential necessary or sufficient explanatory factors (see Mahoney 1998). As several methodologists have suggested, techniques of nominal appraisal have a deterministic understanding of causation in the specific sense that they make it difficult or impossible to model processes of partial and probabilistic causation (Ragin and Zaret 1983; Skocpol 1984; Nichols 1986; Ragin 1987; Lieberman 1991, 1994; Goldstone 1997; Tilly 1997).⁷

Leaving aside the stale debate about whether Skocpol actually follows Mill's methods in the precise manner that John Stuart Mill intended, it is clear that she was inspired by these methods and that her argument relies on their basic logic. In particular, Skocpol uses the method of agreement to identify a common set of causes that were present in her three cases of revolution. At the same time, she uses the method of difference to show how several nonrevolutionary cases (England, prerevolutionary Russia, Germany, Prussia, and Japan) lacked one or more of these causes and thus did not experience a revolution. Two main causes of social revolution are identified by Skocpol: "I have argued that (1) state organizations susceptible to administrative and military collapse when subjected to intensified pressures from more developed countries from abroad and (2) agrarian sociopolitical structures that facilitated widespread peasant revolts against landlords were, taken together, the sufficient distinctive causes of social-revolutionary situations commencing in France, 1789, Russia, 1917, and China, 1911" (1979, p. 154).

Table 1 summarizes these two causes as "conditions for state breakdown" and "conditions for peasant revolt." This table might be seen as evidence that both of Skocpol's main causal factors can be eliminated, given that they are each individually present in positive and negative cases of revolution and hence can be eliminated using the method of difference. However, Skocpol treats the *combination* of the two causes as a *single* factor for the purpose of using Mill's methods. Thus, both causal factors are present only in the three positive cases of revolution; at least one of the two conditions is missing from each case of nonrevolution. In this sense, *when taken together*, conditions for state breakdown and conditions

⁷ Of course, as other scholars have noted, macrocausal analysts may use additional methods that are not deterministic (this point is developed below). To my knowledge, only Savolainen (1994) has attempted to argue that existing nominal methods are not deterministic (she focuses on Mill's methods of agreement and difference). However, in making her argument, Savolainen ends up discussing a logic of inference that does not actually follow Millian methods (see the critiques of Savolainen in Lieberman [1994] and Goldstone [1997]).

TABLE 1
 NOMINAL COMPARISON: SKOCPOL'S USE OF THE METHODS OF AGREEMENT AND DIFFERENCE

	MAIN CAUSAL FACTORS		EXAMPLES OF CAUSAL FACTORS ELIMINATED			OUTCOME
	Conditions for State Breakdown	Conditions for Peasant Revolt	Relative Deprivation	Urban Worker Revolts	Social Revolution	
France	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	
Russia 1917	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	
China	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	
England	Yes	No	Yes	...	No	
Russia 1905	No	Yes	Yes	...	No	
Germany	No	No	Yes	...	No	
Prussia	No	No	Yes	...	No	
Japan	No	No	Yes	...	No	

NOTE.—The scoring of variables is derived from both Skocpol (1979) and Skocpol (1986). Some variables were difficult to score, but in no instance would a change in scoring lead to a violation of the logic of the method of agreement or the method of difference. The more controversial scorings are the following: (1) State breakdown in England: the scoring is based on Skocpol (1979, p. 141) and Skocpol (1986, p. 189). (2) Peasant revolt in Russia 1905: at one point in her argument, Skocpol (1979, p. 117) implies that state breakdown was a necessary cause of peasant revolt. This would suggest that it is logically inconsistent for Russia 1905 to have a yes for peasant revolt and a no for state breakdown (since the latter is necessary for the former). However, the text of her book makes it clear that the "political crisis" (not state breakdown) of 1905 was enough to propel peasants revolts in 1905 Russia (see Skocpol 1979, pp. 133–35). (3) State breakdown and peasant revolt in Germany: the scoring is from Skocpol (1979, pp. 145–47, 156) and Skocpol (1986, p. 189). (4) State breakdown in Japan: the scoring is based on Skocpol (1979, pp. 100–4, 157). In a subsequent analysis, Skocpol (1986, p. 189) suggests that a state breakdown did occur in Japan.

for peasant revolt cannot be eliminated using either the method of agreement or the method of difference.

By contrast, two other potential causal factors considered by Skocpol (1979, pp. 34, 113), relative deprivation and urban worker revolts, can be eliminated (see table 1). Relative deprivation can be eliminated because this factor is present in both positive and negative cases of revolution (in this sense, it is not a sufficient cause of revolution). Urban worker revolts can be eliminated because this factor is not present in all three cases of revolution (in this sense, it is not a necessary cause of revolution). Hence, Skocpol uses the eliminative logic of the method of difference to dispose of relative deprivation explanations, while employing the logic of the method of agreement to reject explanations centered on urban worker revolts.

From one perspective, causal appraisal based on nominal comparison is a powerful means of eliminating rival explanations: a single deviation from an overall or expected pattern of covariation provides enough basis to reject a potential causal factor. Tools for eliminating potential causal factors are especially important for macrocausal studies because these works select only a small number of cases for investigation and thus face the equivalent of a "degrees of freedom problem" (Lijphart 1971; Campbell 1975; Collier 1991). Nominal comparison therefore has the considerable virtue of helping to contribute to a parsimonious explanation, even with a small number of cases. The limitation of the strategy, however, grows directly out of this strength: it assumes a deterministic logic of causation in which one deviation is enough to eliminate a potential causal factor. For example, Skocpol argues that urban worker revolts are not causally significant simply because they are not present in one of her three cases of revolution (i.e., China). Scholars who understand causation in probabilistic terms may well find the causal determinism of nominal strategies to be untenable.

Ordinal Comparison

By concentrating on nominal comparison in *States and Social Revolutions* (1979), it is easy to overlook the ways in which Skocpol also relies on causal appraisal based on ordinal comparison. Ordinal comparison entails the rank ordering of cases into three or more categories based on *the degree to which* a given phenomenon is present. This type of comparison is the basis for J. S. Mill's (1974) method of concomitant variation, which has been largely overlooked in methodological discussions of comparative history (but see DeFelice [1986] and Collier and Collier [1991, p. 20]). Scholars who use this method assess causality by exploring the covariation between ordinal scores on an explanatory variable and an outcome variable. Unlike

the methods of agreement and difference, the method of concomitant variation does not require a pattern of *perfect* covariation to infer causality (see Mill 1974, pp. 402–6). The presence of one case with scores on an explanatory variable and an outcome variable that deviate from a general pattern of covariation does not necessarily mean that the explanatory factor must be outright rejected.⁸ In this sense, it is more difficult to eliminate potential causes with ordinal comparison than with nominal comparison. As a consequence, even though ordinal comparison permits the assessment of partial causation, it may be less helpful for developing parsimonious explanations.

Although she is not explicit about it, Skocpol uses the method of concomitant variation throughout her book on revolutions. Only by recognizing this can we make sense of Goldstone's (1997) observation that Skocpol's "cases of social revolution . . . *differ among themselves on several independent variables*" (p. 109; his emphasis). If Skocpol were exclusively employing a deterministic technique such as the method of agreement, she would have to eliminate independent variables that do not take on the same value across all positive cases of revolution. However, Skocpol employs the method of concomitant variation by disaggregating her two main causal variables—i.e., conditions for state breakdown and conditions for peasant revolt—into constituent ordinal variables that are present to differing degrees across cases.

Table 2 illustrates how the variable "conditions for state breakdown" is disaggregated by Skocpol into three ordinal subvariables: (1) international pressure, which promotes crises for regime actors, (2) nonautonomous state, which prevents government leaders from implementing modernizing reforms, and (3) agrarian backwardness, which hinders national responses to political crises. Likewise, Skocpol disaggregates "conditions for peasant revolt" into two ordinal variables: (1) peasant autonomy and solidarity, which facilitate spontaneous collective action by peasants, and (2) landlord vulnerability, which allows for class transformation in the countryside.⁹

As table 2 suggests, for each of these constituent variables, Skocpol in effect presents a rank ordering across the eight cases. Because the three positive cases of social revolution do not all share the same score for any of the five variables, and because at least one negative case has the same

⁸ The question of how strongly variables must covary before causality can be inferred has not been adequately addressed by analysts. For an initial discussion, see Mahoney (1998).

⁹ The variable of "landlord vulnerability" also encompasses the structure of landholding patterns (e.g., the percentage of small-holder property), which is a major but often overlooked part of Skocpol's (1979) argument.

TABLE 2
ORDINAL COMPARISON: RANKING OF CASES EMPLOYED BY SKOCPOL

	CONDITIONS FOR STATE BREAKDOWN*			CONDITIONS FOR PEASANT REVOLUT†		
	International Pressure	Nonautonomous State	Agrarian Backwardness	Peasant Autonomy and Solidarity	Landlord Vulnerability	
France	2	3	3	2	3	
Russia 1917	4	2	2	3	3	
China	3	3	4	1	2	
England	2	4	1	1	1	
Russia 1905	2	2	2	3	3	
Germany	1	2	1	1	1	
Prussia	3	2	1	1	1	
Japan	3	1	2	1	1	

NOTE.—The rankings for this table are based in part on Skocpol's (1979) summary charts on pp. 155–57; however, I also relied heavily on the text in chaps. 2 and 3. Evidence for some of the variables for which it was more difficult to establish the exact ordering is taken from the following pages: (1) international pressure in England: p. 141 (which implies England faced pressures as great as France and greater than Germany); (2) nonautonomous state in Russia in 1917 and 1905: pp. 88–89 (which implies that the Russian dominant class had more leverage than the Japanese dominant class but certainly not as much as the French or Chinese); (3) agrarian backwardness in Russia 1917 and 1905: p. 128; (4) agrarian backwardness in Japan: pp. 103–4; (5) peasant autonomy and solidarity in France and Russia: p. 128; (6) landlord vulnerability in China vs. other cases: pp. 151–54. Finally, the scoring for peasant autonomy and solidarity in Germany refers to areas east of the Elbe.

* 1 = least, 4 = most.

† 1 = least, 3 = most.

score as a positive case of revolution for each of the variables, it is clear that a deterministic eliminative logic is not at work here.¹⁰ Instead, when viewed in relation to table 1, the data from table 2 suggest that Skocpol may have used an additive procedure for assessing causality. That is, the dichotomous scoring of variables in table 1 may have been derived by adding together scores of the constituent variables in table 2. For example, by adding together scores for the three processes that make up conditions for state breakdown, we find that the four cases that score “yes” on state breakdown in table 1 (i.e., France, Russia 1917, China, and England) have a sum total of at least seven, whereas each of the four cases that score “no” on state breakdown in table 1 have a sum of less than seven.¹¹ Ordinal differences on these constituent variables are used by Skocpol to explain contrasts in the process of state breakdown among cases that share the same score on dichotomous variables. For example, even though Russia and France have the same score on all dichotomous variables, the ordinal comparison makes it clear that state breakdown in Russia was much more strongly conditioned by international pressures than in France, and this difference is highlighted in Skocpol’s case analyses.

Likewise, with conditions for peasant revolt, the four cases that score “yes” in table 1 (i.e., France, Russia 1917, China, and Russia 1905) have a sum of at least three when peasant autonomy/solidarity and landlord vulnerability are added together. All cases with a “no” for peasant revolt in table 1 have the minimal sum of two. Hence, a sum of at least three appears to make peasant revolt extremely likely. Yet, there is substantial variation among the cases that experienced peasant revolt, ranging from China (a sum of three) to Russia (a sum of six). These variations come into play in Skocpol’s analysis, reflecting important differences in the way in which peasant revolts occurred. Thus, China’s peasant revolt initially involved only agrarian disorder, not autonomous onslaughts against landlords, and it was necessary for the Communist Party to mobilize Chinese peasants before a full-scale rebellion could take place. By contrast, in Russia (in both 1905 and 1917), conditions allowed for massive and spontaneous peasant revolts against private-landed property throughout the country. Hence, even among cases that experienced peasant revolts, differences

¹⁰ Several scholars (e.g., Nichols 1986; Burawoy 1989; and Goldstone 1997) have examined most or all of the variables in table 2 as dichotomous categories to show how Skocpol’s (1979) argument does not conform to the methods of agreement and difference. These scholars fail to realize that Skocpol uses ordinal (not dichotomous) comparison in assessing these causal variables. Part of the blame for this misunderstanding rests with Skocpol, who was not explicit in her methodological statement about how she disaggregates dichotomous variables into ordinal constituent variables.

¹¹ To meaningfully add scores together, one must assume that (1) the data reflect interval differences and (2) each constituent causal variable carries the same weight.

in the degree to which peasant autonomy/solidarity and landlord vulnerability were present led to differences in the process and timing of peasant revolt.

When compared to a nominal strategy of causal assessment, ordinal appraisal has the advantage of avoiding deterministic eliminative assumptions and allowing analysts to recognize that the degree to which a given variable is present may make an important difference in the explanation of an outcome. In this sense, ordinal comparison is more consistent with the assumptions of statistical analysis. However, when used by itself and with only a small number of cases, ordinal appraisal has the disadvantage of not providing a strong and clear basis for eliminating causal factors. Unlike nominal comparison, ordinal comparison does not necessarily permit the analyst to eliminate a potential causal factor because a single case deviates from an overall pattern of covariation. In fact, because ordinal comparison cannot deterministically eliminate rival explanations, this strategy may lead analysts to find empirical support for a great number of explanatory variables. Hence, the price of assessing partial causality may well be a loss of parsimony.

Narrative Analysis

In addition to systematically comparing cases with one another, Skocpol's work has a strong "narrative" component—that is, it analyzes revolutions as the product of unique, temporally ordered, and sequentially unfolding events that occur within cases (see Griffin 1992, p. 405). Sewell (1996*b*) points out that if Skocpol's causal argument had depended solely on comparisons of variables across cases, "there would have been no need to write a long book; a brief article with a few simple tables would have sufficed" (p. 262). The question is not really whether Skocpol uses historical narrative but rather how exactly her narrative contributes to the overall causal argument.

The ways in which narrative may or may not play a role in causal analysis have been extensively examined (e.g., Abrams 1982; Abbott 1990, 1992; Aminzade 1992; Griffin 1992, 1993; Kiser 1996; Quadagno and Knapp 1992; Rueschemeyer and Stephens 1997; Sewell 1992, 1996*a*, 1996*b*; Somers 1992; Stone 1979; and Stryker 1996). From these discussions, a consensus has emerged that narrative can be a useful tool for assessing causality in situations where temporal sequencing, particular events, and path dependence must be taken into account. Unfortunately, as Abbott (1992) suggests, methodologists have not offered many concrete illustrations of narrative assessment in actual research practice (but see Gotham and Staples [1996] and Stryker [1996]). In addition, far too little

has been said about the relationship between narrative and other strategies of causal assessment.

It is not possible to present a full summary of Skocpol's narrative argument here. However, figure 1 offers a schematic representation of her narrative for one piece of the overall causal argument: conditions for state breakdown in France. In the nominal comparison discussed above, these conditions were treated at a highly aggregated level as a single variable that was simply summarized as "present" (as indicated by the "yes" in the cell for France under the column "conditions for state breakdown" in table 1). When used in ordinal assessment, this variable was disaggregated into three constituent factors that were ranked across cases (see table 2). Quite obviously, the narrative appraisal in figure 1 takes causal complexity to an entirely different level, offering a historically detailed and nuanced understanding of state breakdown in France by disaggregating it into dozens of small steps. And figure 1 does not even do full justice to Skocpol's narrative argument. For example, the figure overlooks complex feedback linkages between variables, and it fails to summarize Skocpol's observations about the weighting of particular variables and specific understandings of the causal process through which one variable leads to another.

The numerous elements contained in figure 1 include statements that could be understood as involving nominal or ordinal measurement. Yet, narrative analysis is quite distinctive in relation to these alternative approaches. Whereas nominal and ordinal approaches involve broad, highly aggregated variables, narrative analysis entails a major shift toward disaggregation, along with a highly self-conscious focus on the historical sequences in which these disaggregated elements appear. Figure 1 thus offers a visual picture of what scholars such as Sewell (1996*a*, 1996*b*) have referred to as "eventful" analysis and what Skocpol and others call "conjunctural causation." In this strategy of causal analysis, the investigator gives "analytic weight to the conjunctural, unfolding interactions of originally separately determined processes" (Skocpol 1979, p. 320). Narrative analysis is always contingent on theory, and, although Sewell advocates eventful narrative as a form of causal assessment in its own right, narratives are often structured by other strategies of causal assessment (see Skocpol 1994, pp. 332–33). For example, Skocpol's narrative does not focus on events surrounding urban worker revolts precisely because this factor was eliminated in the nominal comparison. Likewise, the narrative analysis of international pressure in France is relatively brief precisely because the ordinal comparison revealed that this variable was comparably less important in the French case.

Figure 1 specifically shows how the variables used in Skocpol's ordinal assessment of conditions for state breakdown (i.e., agrarian backward-

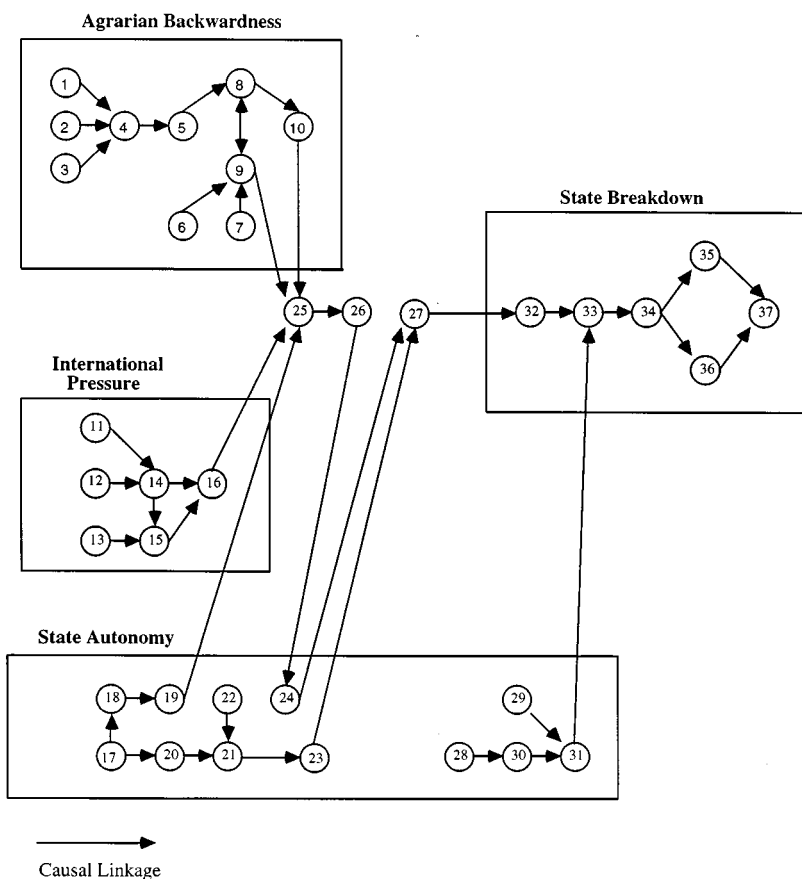


FIG. 1.—Narrative analysis showing conditions for the state breakdown in France (all page numbers are from Skocpol [1979]):

1. Property relations prevent introduction of new agricultural techniques (p. 55)
2. Tax system discourages agricultural innovation (p. 55)
3. Sustained growth discourages agricultural innovation (p. 55)
4. Backwardness of French agriculture (esp. vis-à-vis England) (p. 56)
5. Weak domestic market for industrial goods (pp. 55–56)
6. Internal transportation problems (p. 56)
7. Population growth (p. 56)
8. Failure to achieve industrial breakthrough (p. 56)
9. Failure to sustain economic growth (p. 56)
10. Inability to successfully compete with England (p. 56)
11. Initial military successes under Louis XIV (p. 54)
12. Expansionist ambitions of state (p. 54)
13. French geographical location vis-à-vis England (p. 60)
14. Sustained warfare (pp. 54, 60, 63)

15. State needs to devote resources to both army and navy (p. 60)
16. Repeated defeats in war (pp. 54, 60, 61, 63)
17. Creation of absolutist monarchy; decentralized medieval institutions still persist (pp. 52–53)
18. Dominant class often exempted from taxes (pp. 60–61)
19. State faces obstacles generating loans (p. 61)
20. Socially cohesive dominant class based in proprietary wealth (pp. 56–59; 61–62)
21. Dominant class possesses legal right to delay royal legislation (p. 62)
22. Dominant class exercises firm control over offices (pp. 61–62)
23. Dominant class is capable of blocking state reforms (pp. 61–64)
24. Dominant class resists financial reforms (p. 62)
25. Major financial problems of state (p. 63)
26. State attempts tax/financial reforms (p. 64)
27. Financial reforms fail (pp. 63–65)
28. Recruitment of military officers from privileged classes (p. 65)
29. Military officers hold grievances against the crown (p. 65)
30. Military officers identify with the dominant class (p. 65)
31. Military is unwilling to repress dominant class resistance (pp. 64–65)
32. Financial crisis deepens (p. 64)
33. Pressures for creation of the Estates-General (p. 64)
34. King summons the Estates-General (p. 64)
35. Popular protests spread (p. 66)
36. Conflict among dominant class members in the Estates-General; paralysis of old regime (p. 65)
37. Municipal revolution; the old state collapses (pp. 66–67)

ness, international pressure, and state autonomy) are actually chains of separately determined, causally linked events that interact to produce state breakdown in France, an outcome that is itself made up of a series of causally linked events. The diagram illustrates the role that specific events play in Skocpol's argument, and it allows one to identify points of intersection and begin to see exactly how the three processes come together. Thus, the three causal chains meet at circle 25 to produce "major financial problems of the state," which is a key stepping stone leading to state breakdown. Of course, Skocpol's full argument concerning the causes of revolution in France is much more complex, because it includes the other macrovariable of "conditions for peasant revolt," which is made up of the constituent variables "peasant solidarity/autonomy" and "landlord vulnerability." Diagramming the points of intersection between the causal chains for both "conditions for state breakdown" and "conditions for peasant revolt" in France would be a more complicated task.¹²

¹² Indeed, the narrative analysis in fig. 1 summarizes only 17 pages (i.e., pp. 51–67) of Skocpol's (1979) book.

The contribution of narrative analysis to Skocpol's causal argument does not merely involve providing an empirical basis for scoring cases in the overarching nominal and ordinal comparisons. Rather, the narrative makes an independent contribution: one criterion for judging a causal argument rests with the ability of an analyst to meaningfully assemble specific information concerning the histories of cases into coherent processes. Skocpol's causal argument is made much more convincing by the fact that she is able to order numerous idiosyncratic features of French, Russian, and Chinese history into meaningful accounts of unfolding processes that are consistent with a broader, overarching macrocausal argument. Furthermore, tracing historical processes in a given case over time can be a useful tool for eliminating potential explanations (George 1979; Rueschemeyer and Stephens 1997; Goldstone 1997). For example, narrative can be used to evaluate explanations by establishing at a more disaggregated level whether posited causal mechanisms plausibly link hypothesized explanatory variables with an outcome (Quadagno and Knapp 1992; Kiser 1996). Likewise, narrative can be used to assess rival explanations through a "pattern matching" procedure in which hypotheses are evaluated against multiple features of what was originally treated as only a single unit of observation (Campbell 1975). These procedures are used by Skocpol to eliminate potential causes of revolutions.¹³

When compared to nominal and ordinal comparison, narrative analysis has the obvious strength of allowing the analyst to show sensitivity to detail, process, conjuncture, and causal complexity. Successful narrative accounts are not subject to the criticism of "oversimplification." However, narrative appraisal carries with it key limitations. Most important, this form of assessment can obscure a study's overarching macroexplanation and thus seemingly undermine its theoretical parsimony. Indeed, narrative analysis introduces dozens of new variables that often play an underspecified role in the overall causal argument. For example, it would take hundreds of circles to diagram the full narrative argument in many works of macrocausal analysis. Should each of these circles be considered a separate variable? To what extent does the entire argument rest on the validity of each causal linkage in the narrative? Questions such as these are left unanswered in most narrative assessments, and thus some scholars have viewed narrative as an underspecified and nonrigorous form of causal investigation (see Griffin [1993] and Stryker [1996] for potential solutions to these problems).

¹³ For example, Skocpol (1979, pp. 170–71) argues that ideologically motivated vanguard movements were not an important cause of social revolution partly on the grounds that clear causal mechanisms linking these movements to revolutionary outcomes cannot be identified.

TABLE 3
 STRATEGIES OF CAUSAL ASSESSMENT IN RECENT MACROCAUSAL ANALYSES

	Nominal Comparison	Ordinal Comparison	Narrative Analysis
Goldstone (1991)	X	...	X
Wickham-Crowley (1992)	X	...	...
Ertman (1997)	X	...	X
Rueschemeyer, Stephens, and Stephens (1992) .....	...	X	X
Wuthnow (1989) .....	...	...	X
Clark (1995) .....	...	...	X
Aminzade (1993) .....	...	X	X
Luebbert (1991)	X	X	...
Goodwin and Skocpol (1989)	X	X	...
Downing (1992)	X	X	X
Orloff (1993)	X	X	X
Collier and Collier (1991)	X	X	X

In sum, the Skocpol example shows that nominal, ordinal, and narrative strategies of causal appraisal can be meaningfully combined. The example also demonstrates the distinct strengths and weaknesses of each strategy. Nominal comparison contributes greatly to theoretical parsimony by providing powerful tools of elimination. However, methods associated with this technique require the analyst to adopt a deterministic understanding of causality. Ordinal comparison is a useful strategy for assessing partial causation and examining how the degree to which a variable is present influences an outcome. Yet, used by itself, ordinal comparison provides less incisive criteria for eliminating rival explanations and hence may lead to less parsimonious conclusions. Finally, narrative analysis allows scholars to remain highly sensitive to causal complexity, sequences of processes, and a more fine-grained understanding of historical detail. But, when used alone, this mode of analysis can lead to unparsimonious explanations that can be hard to generalize beyond an individual case. Hence, narrative may suffer from the problems associated with “idiographic” explanation.

CAUSAL ASSESSMENT IN RECENT WORKS OF
 COMPARATIVE HISTORY

Although Skocpol combines nominal, ordinal, and narrative appraisal, recent works reveal a variety of different combinations. This section systematically evaluates the strengths and weaknesses of various combinations. Table 3 lists the works considered and the primary strategies of

causal appraisal they adopt. These works are not the only (or necessarily the best-known) examples of macrocausal analysis. But they are nonetheless useful in illustrating the range of approaches to causal assessment in macrocausal analysis. These works all involve scholarship of high quality, thus facilitating an evaluation of the merits of these different methods independent of the investigators who use them. The instances in which the works do inappropriately use strategies of causal assessment reflect more general methodological issues that arise in macrocausal analysis and not just the failing of the particular researcher.¹⁴

Balancing Parsimony and Determinism

One methodological combination is found in works that use only nominal and narrative strategies. This combination has the virtue of giving scholars the freedom to employ the powerful eliminative logic of nominal comparison without having to further complicate matters by reassessing relationships in ordinal terms. The combination can thus narrow the range of hypothesized relationships down to a set of explanations that are elegant in their overall simplicity. Furthermore, the use of narrative in this combination can contribute to the persuasiveness of the explanation by allowing the analyst to show how a causal pattern appears valid even when assessed in light of great historical detail.

Yet a nominal-narrative combination is not without limitations. For one thing, the absence of ordinal comparison leaves the researcher without a powerful tool for evaluating partial and probabilistic causation. Furthermore, divorced from assessments of partial causation, historical narratives can become dry, mechanical stories in which the same causal pattern operates in case after case. Overall, then, the scholar using macrocausal analysis based on nominal and narrative appraisal faces challenges in avoiding overly deterministic explanations.

Jack Goldstone's *Revolution and Rebellion in the Early Modern World* (1991) is illustrative of this combination. Employing a variant of a most different systems design, Goldstone seeks to explain state breakdown during the English Revolution, the French Revolution, the Ottoman crisis, the Ming-Qing transition in China, and several other early modern cases by showing "how a common causal pattern lay behind all these events"

¹⁴ It should be noted that most of the works considered here examine at least two national cases. However, many recent macrocausal analyses use change over time or brief cross-national comparisons to assess causality in a single national case. For recent examples, see Bensel (1990); Skocpol (1992); Steinmetz (1993); Tilly (1995); and Sewell (1996a).

(p. 12).¹⁵ He uses nominal comparison extensively to reject potential explanations. For example, he argues (p. 19) that Skocpol's argument, which stresses the importance of military pressure for revolution, is "poorly suited" for explaining variation in early modern Europe. He points out that some revolutionary cases were relatively free from war (e.g., France in 1848), while other instances of nonrevolution were characterized by intense warfare (e.g., France in the late 17th and early 18th centuries). He thus concludes, "the incidence of war is neither a necessary nor a sufficient answer to the question of the causes of state breakdown" (p. 20). Many other explanatory factors are rejected either because they are not present across all cases of state breakdown or because they are present both in cases of state breakdown and cases of state stability.¹⁶

The explanation favored by Goldstone, the one that withstands his nominal-comparative tests, is a "demographic/structural" model that highlights how long-term population growth leads to state breakdown by affecting critical structural variables. In particular, population growth contributes to state financial crises, intra-elite and elite-state conflict, popular opposition, and transformative ideologies. Through a sometimes painstaking evaluation of the historiography, Goldstone shows how this causal pattern characterizes each case of state breakdown but not cases and periods of nonbreakdown. The overall explanation is, as he puts it, "quite beautiful in its parsimony" (p. 459), and it offers a fascinating vision of how gradual, long-term changes operating on several levels of analysis might come together to produce sudden episodes of dramatic transformation.

Goldstone is inventive in the organization of historical presentations, which helps him avoid the problem of presenting overly repetitious narrative accounts—a recurring problem in this kind of study. In the discussion of England, the first case examined, he carefully develops a quantitative model and presents a lengthy qualitative assessment. By contrast, less attention is given to the quantitative model in the discussion of France, although an extensive qualitative analysis is provided. Cleverly, Goldstone spares readers from extended historical discussion in his analysis of subsequent cases, just at the point when the narrative argument might begin to be repetitive.

¹⁵ Goldstone (1991, pp. 53–61) characterizes his methodology as an effort to identify "robust processes." However, his discussion of this method follows the logic of the most different systems design quite closely.

¹⁶ A nominal eliminative logic is used by Goldstone (1991) to reject the Whig explanation and revisionist accounts of the English breakdown (p. 67), explanations that emphasize the importance of the commercialization of agriculture to revolution (p. 146), sociological explanations of the French Revolution (pp. 171–73), and crude demographic explanations of the Meiji Restoration (pp. 405–6).

However, Goldstone's argument at times reads quite deterministically, as if explanatory variables had to produce revolution, and as if actors had no room to avert state breakdown given prevailing demographic trends and structural conditions.¹⁷ The narrative structure of the work in part reinforces this tendency toward determinism. The majority of Goldstone's narrative analysis is not devoted to analyzing contingent events and processes but rather to a sustained consideration of historical and sociological debates and to empirically demonstrating the presence or absence of particular causal variables. Precisely because a change in the scoring of a single one of his dichotomous variables might call into question the entire (nominal) argument, he devotes considerable attention to making sure that each variable is measured correctly. This effort allows Goldstone to demonstrate an extraordinary hold over historical material and often makes for engaging reading, but it does not mitigate the problem of determinism.

Two caveats should be made about this overall assessment of Goldstone. First, although his analysis is focused on a relatively small number of national cases, he supplements this small-*N* comparison with a statistical analysis based on a large number of within-case patterns. In particular, he operationalizes individual macrovariables in terms of a large number of quantitative measures and combines these measures into an overall "political stress indicator" that is evaluated statistically. However, this should not lead one to mistakenly conclude that the book is primarily a statistical analysis of revolutions. Rather, Goldstone's main goal is to use insights from brief statistical within-case analyses as supplementary evidence that supports the central nominal argument developed for a small number of national cases.

Second, Goldstone moves toward ordinal comparison in his discussions of England, France, and Germany in the 1830s and 1840s. In this sense, *Revolution and Rebellion* does contain some ordinal analysis. However, the overriding focus on validating the nominal argument seems to prevent Goldstone from fully employing the strengths of this strategy. An example can be found when, in one of the most interesting discussions of the book (pp. 311–34), Goldstone briefly moves toward ordinal comparison to suggest how political leadership might make an explanatory difference. Based on an implicit ordinal comparison, he argues that, despite substantial population pressures, revolution was less likely in both England and France in 1830 than during previous centuries because fiscal reforms had been put into place that served to control state crises and mute elite hostility.

¹⁷ Goldstone (1991) attempts to suggest that state breakdowns were not inevitable (see pp. 148–49), but this claim appears somewhat empty given that he asserts that his explanation would be falsified if his demographic and structural causes were present in an early modern case that did not experience a revolution (see pp. xxv–xxvi).

Thus, the period around 1830 is understood to be only *partially* conducive to revolution. In this context, Goldstone suggests that the reason England averted revolution in the 1830s, whereas France did not, rests with the contrast between the compromising political strategy pursued by William IV in England and the inflammatory actions of Charles X in France. Leadership therefore briefly appears as an additional variable that could fruitfully be added to the basic demographic/structural model. Yet, Goldstone ultimately avoids this conclusion, suggesting that the key difference between England and France might be due not to leadership but to the fact that key demographic/structural variables did not reach critical threshold points necessary to produce a revolution in England (pp. 322, 342). In the end, Goldstone's analysis primarily uses only nominal and narrative strategies, and his argument must stand or fall based on the strengths of this methodological combination.

The shortcomings of narrative analysis have led some scholars to abandon this strategy in favor of introducing more cases and more sophisticated forms of nominal comparison. This is true of Timothy Wickham-Crowley's *Guerrillas and Revolution in Latin America* (1992). In an effort to explain the emergence and relative success of guerrilla movements in modern Latin America, Wickham-Crowley employs Boolean algebra, which he correctly identifies as a systematic extension of Mill's methods of agreement and difference (p. 303). The use of Boolean algebra makes sense both because Wickham-Crowley seeks to assess processes of "multiple conjunctural causation" in which different combinations of explanatory factors produce the same outcome (Ragin 1987) and because after he divides countries into different periods and regions his case base is sufficiently large to meaningfully employ this method. Through the Boolean minimization procedure (see Ragin 1987, pp. 93–95), he eliminates many potential explanations and in the end is left with only a handful of combinations of variables to account for both the successes and failures of Latin American guerrilla movements.

Wickham-Crowley (1992) does not develop what Sewell (1996*b*) refers to as "eventful narratives" to support his causal explanation.¹⁸ Rather, his historical discussions focus on carefully evaluating potential hypotheses and sorting through evidence to assess whether explanatory variables are present or absent in specific cases. Unencumbered by an eventful narrative, the book seems more systematically comparative and more rigorous in its hypothesis testing than most works of comparative history. At the same time, the lack of an extended narrative gives the impression that no

¹⁸ In chaps. 8 and 11, Wickham-Crowley (1992) presents somewhat more detailed narrative discussions. However, these discussions are brief and clearly play a secondary role within the overall analysis.

historical contingencies are at work, reinforcing the appearance of determinism in the nominal argument. Indeed, Wickham-Crowley makes little pretense of avoiding causal determinism. Rather, his approach is to maximize the strength of nominal comparison by employing the most sophisticated methods available, even if this means not attending to the nominal strategy's characteristic weakness.

Other scholars, such as Thomas Ertman in *Birth of the Leviathan* (1997), address the problem of determinism by attempting to reconcile nominal comparison with a focus on partial causation. Ertman carefully constructs a typology of four types of early modern regime states, and his goal is to explain why particular European cases developed specific types.¹⁹ He first rejects several competing explanations by using the eliminative logic of the methods of agreement and difference. In particular, he shows how the theories of state development advanced by Hintze (1975), Tilly (1985), Mann (1986), Anderson (1974), and Downing (1992) lead to predictions about early modern Europe that are contradicted by at least some of his cases (see Ertman 1997, pp. 12, 15, 18). Based on the inability of alternative theories to account for these "exception" cases, Ertman justifies the development of a new explanation. In an elegant presentation in chapter 1, he outlines this alternative explanation, showing how three dichotomously measured variables (i.e., administrative vs. participatory government, pre-1450 vs. post-1450 geopolitical competition, and existence vs. nonexistence of powerful representative assemblies) "can account for *most* of the variation" in early modern state building in Europe (p. 6, emphasis added).

Ertman carefully chose the word "most," for his explanation cannot account for *all* of the variation in outcomes among the 14 cases he considers. In particular, state development in Sweden and Denmark does not correspond to the pattern suggested by Ertman's explanation (see pp. 33, 266–67, 305–16). In these cases, "powerful contingent events conspired to confound expected paths of development" (p. 33). The presence of these exception cases leads Ertman to concede that his explanatory variables did not make outcomes inevitable; rather, "contingent historical circumstances" blew development processes off course (p. 320). With this concession, the author introduces the idea of partial and probabilistic causation into what is otherwise a deterministic nominal argument. Yet, in doing

¹⁹ At one point in the introduction, Ertman (1997) notes that he is interested in explaining variations within the same basic regime-state categories—e.g., why one case is more of an instance of a given regime-state outcome than another (p. 32). This suggests that he uses ordinal comparison. However, beyond a couple of sentences for France (see specifically pp. 35, 91, 110), he does not develop this line of analysis, and ordinal comparison plays virtually no role in the book.

so, he may well have introduced a double standard into the argument: how can Ertman reject other scholars' arguments on the grounds that they cannot fully explain the variation of interest, while preserving his own explanation, which also cannot fully explain the variation of interest? This issue is not satisfactorily addressed in *Birth of the Leviathan*, and thus the study does not convincingly demonstrate how nominal explanation can be used to assess patterns of partial causation.

The basic narrative structure of the book largely avoids the problem of presenting repetitious historical accounts that can plague works that employ a nominal-narrative combination. Because Ertman looks at four different outcomes, the reader remains engaged from chapter to chapter as new outcomes are explored. This is true even though Ertman's dense and contextually rich narratives remain carefully focused on the explanatory argument. In fact, with the exception of the awkward inclusion of the Swedish and Danish cases, which are tacked on at the very end of the book, Ertman's narrative is exemplary for avoiding the temptation of presenting long chronologies of events that are not focused on the central explanatory argument.

Analyzing Partial Causation in History

Other works of macrocasual analysis avoid the shortcomings associated with nominal comparison by employing only ordinal and narrative analysis. This combination allows the analyst to showcase the ordinal argument and elevate patterns of partial causality to center stage. Moreover, narrative analysis plays a major role in supplementing the ordinal assessment: rich historical investigation is used to identify the specific scoring of variables across cases. In this sense, macrocausal analysis based on ordinal and narrative causal assessment avoids causal determinism and blends narrative appraisal more smoothly into the overall argument than works that combine nominal and narrative strategies.

The distinct limitation of an ordinal-narrative combination, however, is that it cannot easily eliminate alternative explanations. When only a small number of cases are selected and a nominal strategy is not used, explanatory factors that partially covary with an outcome cannot necessarily be rejected. Thus, the practitioner of an ordinal-narrative combination may be prone to find that many variables are at least partially supported as a component of the explanation, such that an unwieldy number of factors may be identified as contributing causes. In addition, the ordinal assessment may well suggest that quite different combinations of scores on variables combine to produce the same outcome across cases, further complicating the causal argument. The result can be a high degree of causal indeterminism and a loss of theoretical parsimony.

Dietrich Rueschemeyer, Evelyne Huber Stephens, and John D. Stephens's *Capitalist Development and Democracy* (1992) is both a clear example of this combination and a good illustration of how the combination's limitations can be partially sidestepped. The primary goal of the book is to explain the origins of democracy in roughly 40 countries from 19th- and 20th-century Europe, North America, and Latin America. As is characteristic of scholars who choose not to rely heavily on nominal comparison, Rueschemeyer, Stephens, and Stephens tend not to eliminate potential causal variables outright but instead incorporate them into a highly encompassing theoretical framework.²⁰ Consequently, the authors identify a long list of variables that might contribute in partial and complex ways to democratization.

Building on quantitative cross-national work, which has repeatedly identified a positive correlation between economic development and democracy, the authors attempt to specify the variables that make up the intermediary sequences (i.e., causal mechanisms) linking development with democracy. Variables from three broad categories are considered. First, they examine several factors derived from a "relative class power model." Most importantly, Rueschemeyer, Stephens, and Stephens show that the presence of a strong working class is positively associated with democracy, while the presence of a strong landlord class is negatively associated with democracy. For example, in cases where the working class is weak and landed elites are strong, as in many Latin American countries, democracy has been infrequent and unstable (p. 270).

Second, several explanatory variables center on ordinal assessments of state power and state-society relations.²¹ For example, the authors explore how different levels of state autonomy affect the prospects for democracy. They argue that if "state autonomy" is defined as autonomy vis-à-vis non-elite groups in society, there is "an inverse relationship between state autonomy and democracy" (p. 65). By contrast, they suggest that if state autonomy is defined as autonomy vis-à-vis the dominant class, then increased state autonomy makes democracy more likely (pp. 64–66). Other state-centered variables concern ordinal differences in the organizational

²⁰ The authors reject certain deterministic hypotheses, but they do not usually eliminate specific variables from these hypotheses. For example, they reject Moore's (1966) hypothesis that the bourgeoisie is necessary for democracy, but they nonetheless still consider the bourgeoisie to be an important explanatory variable that affects a country's prospects for democracy.

²¹ Some of these variables are used in conjunction with nominal comparison—e.g., the claim that state autonomy is a necessary condition for democracy (Rueschemeyer et al. 1992, p. 64). However, the main thrust of the argument is based on ordinal comparison.

density of society and the position of coercive organizations in the state (pp. 66–68).

Third, several variables involve transnational structures of power. Especially with respect to these variables, the authors avoid stating any rigid generalizations because they believe the effect of transnational factors is strongly mediated by domestic factors. Thus, for example, they find no clear-cut relationship between extent of warfare, economic dependency, and political dependency and the emergence of democracy. The ways in which these factors contribute to democracy must be viewed in light of scores of other variables (pp. 69–73).

As this overview suggests, it is not possible to summarize Rueschemeyer, Stephens, and Stephens's argument in terms of a single causal pattern. Variables combine together in different ways to produce democracy. As a result, historical narrative becomes the tool through which the authors assess the specific causes of democracy across their cases. More precisely, historical narrative is used to establish the ordinal weighting of each variable and thus the particular combination of scores that led to democracy in a given case. Because the relative importance of specific causal factors is different for each country, the reader is offered substantially varied narratives from one case to the next.

On one level, the major limitations associated with an ordinal-narrative combination are plainly present in *Capitalist Development and Democracy*. Specifically, it is difficult to summarize the causal argument of the book because so many factors and potential causal paths are introduced. In this sense, the argument might be viewed as suffering from causal indeterminism. Yet, on another level, Rueschemeyer, Stephens, and Stephens partially overcome this problem by identifying "relative class power" as their most important set of variables (p. 5).²² When looked at in light of only these particular variables, the argument seems manageable. This privileging of one set of variables as more important than others is of course a standard technique in multivariate statistical research. But the procedure is used less often in macrocausal analysis. Rueschemeyer, Stephens, and Stephens's study suggests how analysts who do not employ numerical coefficients can nonetheless weigh the importance of variables through close qualitative appraisal.

A desire to have more eventful narratives has contributed to calls for more fully historical approaches to comparative history. In recent years, several works have appeared that employ primarily only narrative ap-

²² The authors do not simply arbitrarily single out class-power factors as the most important variables. Rather, the empirical evidence suggests that these factors best explain the robust correlation between development and democracy—a correlation that cannot be well explained by state or international power complexes.

praisal to assess causality, carefully avoiding for the most part nominal and ordinal comparative techniques. This might be seen as an attractive option by scholars who seek to “free” narrative from the constraints imposed on it by logical comparative methods (e.g., Sewell 1996a, 1996b). On the other hand, narrative appraisal has been criticized on its own terms. Scholars have argued that narrative, when not supplemented by alternative strategies, is “mere description” or “story telling” (see Griffin 1992).

Robert Wuthnow’s *Communities of Discourse* (1989) and Samuel Clark’s *State and Status* (1995) are examples of recent studies that use primarily narrative appraisal to assess patterns of causation. Yet, it is interesting that these are also works that only partially and imperfectly correspond to macrocausal analysis. Thus, while at certain points the studies seek to make causal inferences about macro-level structures and processes, they are also centrally concerned with using narrative to offer meaningful *interpretations* of history that show sensitivity to the culturally embedded intentions of individual and group actors. This concern with interpretation moves these works close to what Skocpol and Somers (1980) call contrast-oriented comparative history. In this mode of comparative history, narratives are structured by—and carefully organized around—certain broad concepts and orienting themes that enable the analyst to offer a commentary on the distinctive features of each case.

Indeed, the books by Wuthnow and Clark suggest that the use of narrative *in the absence of* nominal or ordinal methods may be better suited for description and interpretation than for causal inference. Thus, Wuthnow’s narrative analysis is most effective when using broad concepts introduced at the beginning of the book (e.g., production, selection, institutionalization) to develop an interpretive account that illuminates important meaningful processes that characterized the Protestant Reformation, the Enlightenment, and the rise of Marxist Socialism. When assessing variables that other scholars have introduced to *explain* these events, Wuthnow’s narrative account is less convincing. For example, he rejects class-based variables mainly on the grounds that they do not prove illuminating when understanding the historical meaning and interpretive significance of the processes that constituted the three major cultural innovations under consideration (pp. 566–70). However, a variable need not be interpretively illuminating to be useful in causal assessment, and thus analysts expressly concerned with causal inference may believe Wuthnow’s narrative account provides weak grounds for rejecting class-based variables.

Similar remarks can be made about Clark’s new book on state building and aristocratic elites in Western Europe during the early modern period. Clark pursues narrative analysis through the lens of four “large processes”:

commercialization, centralization, differentiation, and status. Although he claims to draw on an ordinal/correlational method (p. 23), most of his analysis involves a straightforward narrative assessment of how these large processes and their respective subprocesses played themselves out in contrasting ways across and within the British Isles and France, Savoy, and the Southern Low Countries. The difficulty Clark finds in using narrative for the purpose of causal analysis becomes clear in a section in the concluding chapter entitled, "The Causes of the Differentiation of Power." After reflecting on his narrative account, Clark writes that "While there has been a master trend toward power differentiation over the centuries, during the period covered by this book there was no master *cause* of this trend. . . . The lesson is that if sociologists want to understand the master trend of differentiation they will have to give greater consideration to the *particularities* of history" (p. 370; emphasis added). It is not surprising that Clark reaches this conclusion, for his narrative-based approach is better suited for *interpreting* the historical meaning and significance of power differentiation than for *explaining* its origins.

Finally, it must be noted that even when scholars eschew ordinal and nominal strategies in favor of narrative analysis, their causal arguments may inadvertently be drawn back to these strategies. An example is found in *Ballots and Barricades*, a fine book by Ronald Aminzade (1993). The central question Aminzade poses is why, despite many important similarities, did the French cities of Toulouse, Saint-Étienne, and Rouen have revolutionary communes marked by dramatically different balances of power between liberals, radicals, and socialists during the 1870–71 period. Explicitly seeking to follow Sewell's agenda for an event-centered historical sociology, Aminzade suggests that his argument "takes the form of analytic narratives—that is, theoretically structured stories about coherent sequences of motivated actions" (p. 27). Aminzade's explanation is indeed highly sensitive to issues of timing, path dependence, and event sequencing, but his "analytic narratives" are also clearly structured by more formal comparative methods, in particular the method of concomitant variation. Thus, potential causal factors such as degree of industrial backwardness are called into question because they do not covary with the relative strength of liberal, radical, and socialist movements in the three cities (p. 4). And the main explanatory argument offered by Aminzade—which highlights the importance of the relative timing of local economic development and class struggles and the degree of worker political autonomy vis-à-vis local Republican Party formation—is based in substantial measure on cross-case, ordinal comparison (pp. 252–56). In this sense, *Ballots and Barricades* has at least as much methodological common ground with *Capitalist Development and Democracy* as with books by Wuthnow and Clark.

Rigorous Hypothesis Testing and the Problem of Frozen History

Notwithstanding recent calls for a more eventful sociology, some macrocausal analysts employ primarily only nominal and ordinal strategies, opting not to include extensive narratives in their studies. Because narrative can have a somewhat ambiguous relationship to causal analysis, works that employ a nominal-ordinal combination may appear to offer a notably rigorous form of hypothesis assessment. Indeed, this combination allows all scholarly energy to be directed toward testing hypotheses through systematic, cross-case comparisons. And because hypothesis testing takes place using *both* nominal and ordinal comparison, the overall impression of a thorough causal assessment is reinforced.

Yet, from the perspective of many historical sociologists, the exclusion of narrative analysis can lead to overly rigid causal arguments in which eventful processes, sequencing, and timing are not given sufficient attention. As Burawoy remarks (1989, pp. 769–70), macrocomparative analysts may “freeze history” by ignoring sequences of processes and interconnections among variables. Furthermore, if indeed one important litmus test of a good comparative-historical argument is the ability of a scholar to make sense of unique and sequentially unfolding processes within cases, then studies that do not use narrative analysis simply lack a major tool of causal evaluation.

Gregory Luebbert’s *Liberalism, Fascism, or Social Democracy* (1991) exemplifies a nominal-ordinal combination. In conjunction with his nominal assessment, Luebbert implicitly employs Mill’s methods of agreement and difference to uncover the origins of liberal democratic, fascist, and social democratic regimes in interwar Europe. Drawing on the powerful eliminative logic of these methods, he rejects several existing explanations of interwar regimes. For example, Luebbert argues that explanations of fascism that point to the depression and high inflation “simply do not stand up to comparative analysis” (p. 307). Some cases experienced economic downturns and inflation as significant as the fascist cases yet did not develop fascist regimes. Conversely, at least one case (i.e., Spain) that developed a fascist regime “neither suffered from hyperinflation nor experienced the depression deeply” (p. 308). In this sense, the depression and inflation are neither necessary nor sufficient causes of fascism and can be rejected.

Luebbert’s preferred explanation centers on political coalitions among social classes. He holds that liberal-democratic vs. non-liberal-democratic regime outcomes can be explained based on whether a “lib-lab” alliance pattern (i.e., an alliance between liberals and the labor movement) was present before World War I. In all of the liberal-democratic cases, this alliance pattern was present; in all of the non-liberal-democratic cases,

this alliance was absent. Hence, the dichotomous explanatory variable of “lib-labism” is perfectly correlated with liberal democracy. Luebbert also explains differences among nonliberal cases by exploring whether the peasantry united with middle classes, which is argued to have led to fascist regimes, or whether the peasantry united with socialists, which is argued to have led to social-democratic regimes. Here again, the author identifies invariant relations between his categorical explanatory variables and outcomes.

Luebbert’s argument also explicitly draws on ordinal comparison (pp. 3–4). He (informally) reconceptualizes his dichotomous explanatory variable of lib-labism as an ordinal scale and ranks countries based on the degree to which they experienced lib-labism.²³ He also ordinally ranks countries in terms of the extent to which they developed liberal-democratic regimes. These rankings allow him to assess the covariation between the two variables. One of the interesting features of Luebbert’s argument is that, in the ordinal assessment, there is substantial *but not perfect* covariation between lib-labism and liberal democracy.²⁴ Despite the less than perfect fit, Luebbert suggests that the association is strong enough to conclude the variables are causally related. Hence, when dichotomous categories are converted to ordinal variables, Luebbert adopts a probabilistic understanding of causation in order to argue that a pattern of strong but not perfect covariation reflects causation.

Liberalism, Fascism, or Social Democracy does not contain significant chronological narratives of unfolding events and processes. Rather, Luebbert’s main focus is on using historical evidence to rigorously measure nominal and ordinal appraisal variables and employ them to test causal hypotheses; he leaves it to the reader to piece together the chronological histories and event sequences that surrounded the development of interwar regimes in Europe. Consequently, Luebbert’s explanation is relatively static and “uneventful” when compared to narrative-based works. Although Burawoy (1989) charged Skocpol (1979) with freezing history, the accusation is actually much more appropriate for Luebbert.

Because narrative analysis can entail the presentation of lengthy chronologies, this strategy may be of necessity, precluded in article-length manuscripts that seek to develop and test major hypotheses in relatively few pages. For example, Jeff Goodwin and Theda Skocpol’s “Explaining Revolutions in the Contemporary Third World” (1989) summarizes the ordinal and nominal arguments developed more fully by Goodwin (1988) in his doctoral dissertation, but—likely for reasons of space—skips the

²³ Luebbert (1991) actually uses the variable of prewar liberal hegemony, which is a proximate measure of lib-labism.

²⁴ I have discussed this elsewhere (Mahoney 1998).

analytical narratives presented in the larger work. When compared to the dissertation (now a forthcoming book [see Goodwin forthcoming]), the article illustrates how studies that use only nominal and ordinal comparison can rigorously test hypotheses through systematic comparisons but cannot show an appreciation for densely contextualized and sequentially unfolding historical processes.

Goodwin and Skocpol use nominal comparison to eliminate several potential explanations of Third World revolutions. For example, they implicitly use the method of difference to eliminate poverty and professional revolutionary organizations as causes of revolutions: these factors are present widely in both cases of revolution and nonrevolution in the Third World and thus cannot explain why some countries have revolutions while others do not (pp. 490–91; see also pp. 497–98 for other uses of the method of difference). However, they do not use nominal comparison to develop their own favored state-centered explanation. Rather, this explanation is based on variables that are conceptualized continuously and, when actually applied to specific cases, assessed as ordinal categories (see p. 504 fig. 1). Specifically, Third World countries with low state bureaucratization, low levels of state penetration of national territory, and limited state incorporation of social groups are argued to be especially vulnerable to revolution. By contrast, high levels on each of these variables make revolution very unlikely. For cases that exhibit intermediate levels on one or more of these variables, such as Peru and Guatemala in the late 1980s, the likelihood of revolution is somewhere in the middle (p. 503). Consistent with ordinal appraisal, Goodwin and Skocpol (pp. 496–500) state their hypotheses in probabilistic terms—that is, as making outcomes “more likely” or “less likely.”

The fact that Goodwin and Skocpol employ nominal comparison (which is associated with causal determinism in small-*N* analysis) to evaluate other scholars' arguments, but use ordinal comparison (which is compatible with probabilistic causation) to develop their own explanation, might lead one to conclude they have created a double standard similar to the one that arose in relation to Ertman's book. Yet, when Goodwin and Skocpol eliminate alternative explanations using the method of difference, they show not only that a few deviant cases fail to conform to the expected causal pattern but that *most* cases do not conform to the anticipated result. For example, *most* countries with poverty and professional revolutionaries have not experienced revolution. Given that the alternative explanations rejected by Goodwin and Skocpol have no apparent relationship with Third World revolutions, it seems likely that these explanations would have been eliminated even if methods that allow for the assessment of partial causation were employed. In this sense, Goodwin

and Skocpol do not appear to hold alternative explanations to a different standard of falsification than their own explanation.²⁵

Recent Studies that Combine All Three Strategies

Finally, some recent studies have combined all three strategies, if not always in the same exact manner as Skocpol's *States and Social Revolutions* (1979). As suggested in the discussion of Skocpol, this combination has the merit of helping to balance out the specific limitations associated with each strategy. For example, the characteristic weaknesses of a nominal strategy are seemingly countered by the use of ordinal and narrative strategies, the weaknesses of narrative analysis are overcome by the strengths of nominal and ordinal comparison, and the limitations of ordinal appraisal find antidotes in narrative and nominal assessment. To at least some extent, then, a "triple combination" of strategies brings together the best of all three worlds.

However, the triple combination requires analysts to develop complex, multilayered explanations. This methodological complexity of necessity breeds some loss of parsimony. Indeed, identifying all of the main variables and understanding the overall causal argument in studies that employ a nominal-ordinal-narrative combination can be a quite challenging task. In order to mitigate confusion, scholars may emphasize primarily the nominal argument when they summarize their findings and methodology at the beginning and end of their studies (this was true with Skocpol). They may also lean heavily on a nominal strategy throughout the analysis, using ordinal comparison and narrative primarily to add nuance and credibility to the main nominal argument. Yet, the fact that all three strategies are actually being used often fuels tensions and apparent contradictions. For example, assuming that variables are not disaggregated when moving from nominal to ordinal comparison, analysts must choose whether a given narrative passage corresponds with the nominal assessment or the ordinal assessment. Confusion over whether the narrative analysis is highlighting the nominal or ordinal explanation may lead to uncertainty concerning the relevance of narrative passages to an overall argument. Likewise, if an author identifies a study's methodology as entailing only a nominal strategy, the use of ordinal and narrative analysis throughout the

²⁵ By contrast, Ertman (1997) fails to make a convincing argument why his explanation, which cannot account for two cases, should be accepted over alternative explanations, which cannot explain four cases (the theories by Hintze [1975], Tilly [1985], Mann [1986], Downing [1992], Anderson [1974] each appear to be unable to account for four of Ertman's 14 cases—see Ertman [1997], pp. 12, 15, 18).

actual text of the study may appear to readers as logically inconsistent with the author's stated methodology and analytic summary remarks.

One notable recent example of the triple combination is Brian M. Downing's *The Military Revolution and Political Change* (1992). Explicitly building on the work of Barrington Moore (1966), Downing sets out to explain the origins of liberal democracy and bureaucratic absolutism in Europe. His macroexplanation is based on nominal comparison, and it unfolds in two steps. First, Downing (1992) argues that medieval Europe developed a set of institutions and power relations (e.g., a balance between crown and nobility, decentralized military systems, and peasant property rights) that distinguished it from all other world civilizations and predisposed the region to democracy (pp. 18–55). In effect, he uses the method of agreement to show that this “medieval constitutionalism” was necessary but not sufficient for democracy. Second, drawing on the method of difference, he explains variation in political regime outcomes among European countries (i.e., democracy vs. absolutism) by reference to the “military revolution” of the 16th and 17th centuries. Specifically, Downing argues that countries that experienced a high level of warfare *and* mobilized extensive domestic resources to finance modern armies undermined their predisposition to democracy and built nondemocratic, absolutist political systems. By contrast, if either or both of these two processes were absent, then the medieval constitutional heritage was preserved and liberal-democratic systems were eventually developed.

Downing also assesses causal patterns using ordinal comparison, though, unlike Skocpol, he does not disaggregate nominal causal variables into constituent processes. Instead, he reassesses nominal explanatory variables as ordinal variables at the same level of aggregation (see p. 242). For example, in his discussion of the origins of bureaucratic absolutism in 17th-century Prussia and France, Downing seeks not only to understand why these countries developed the same (dichotomously measured) regime outcome. Rather, one of his major concerns is to understand why France developed a less extensive form of absolutism, which in turn allowed for “a second chance for liberal democracy” (p. 127). He explains this ordinal difference (i.e., a very high level of absolutism in Prussia versus a moderate level in France) in terms of ordinal differences on his key explanatory variable of domestic mobilization of resources to finance army building. Specifically, he suggests the French economy was wealthier and the French dominant class stronger than its Prussian counterparts, which meant that the French state mobilized fewer domestic resources and thus preserved more of its medieval constitution heritage (pp. 127–32).

Yet, this is not the full story in explaining the difference between France and Prussia. Downing also offers a rich narrative discussion of how causally connected events unfolded in contrasting ways in the period following

the military revolution. For instance, because French political institutions providing for an independent nobility were not completely wiped out (as they were in Prussia), the French aristocracy remained powerful enough to effectively oppose the monarchy. Likewise, peasant communities with a high capacity for revolt were not overwhelmed by totalizing bureaucracies as in Prussia. These processes, uncovered and developed through historical narrative, help explain why France, and not Prussia, was able to get another chance for liberal democracy (pp. 132–38).

The France-Prussia example is merely one illustration of how Downing combines nominal, ordinal, and narrative appraisal; others are not hard to find.²⁶ In one sense, because *The Military Revolution* uses all three strategies, its methodological strengths and weaknesses parallel those of *States and Social Revolutions*. However, a major difference merits emphasis. Downing's shift from nominal to ordinal appraisal does not involve a radical reconceptualization and disaggregation of variables. Consequently, when compared to Skocpol's explanation, the logic of Downing's argument may seem easier to follow and provoke less confusion. At the same time, however, Downing's causal argument may appear to lack the methodological sophistication of Skocpol's, precisely because his argument does not operate on multiple levels of conceptual aggregation.

Like Skocpol and in contrast to Downing, Ann Shola Orloff in *The Politics of Pensions* (1993) does disaggregate variables when shifting from nominal to ordinal assessment. Orloff's primary objective is to explain variations in the timing and character of social programs for the aged in Britain, Canada, and the United States. Specifically, she asks (a) why did Britain adopt old-age coverage before World War I, whereas the United States and Canada did not, (b) why in the 1920s did Canada adopt a federal pension law, whereas the United States did not, and (c) why in the 1930s did the United States adopt a nationwide program for the elderly, whereas Canada failed to adopt contributory insurance? Orloff uses nominal comparison (principally the method of difference) to generate the following answers:²⁷ (a) the British state was capable of initiating and

²⁶ An excellent example is Downing's (1992, chap. 7) discussion of England. The nominal comparison shows how early modern England lacked the warfare and domestic mobilization of resources necessary to undermine its medieval predisposition to democracy. However, the ordinal comparison demonstrates that varying levels of warfare and domestic resource mobilization led to differing degrees of constitutionalism across three different time periods (i.e., pre-1642, 1648–82, and 1682–1713). These three time periods are analyzed through a fascinating narrative that nicely blends together both the nominal and ordinal arguments.

²⁷ Orloff (1993) presents a detailed methodological discussion that highlights the ways in which she combines Millian methods, a most similar nations design, and elements

managing complex social programs, whereas the U.S. and Canadian states were not, (b) the U.S. state was extremely fragmented, whereas the Canadian state was not, and (c) the U.S. state had enhanced capacity after 1930, whereas the Canadian state was hampered by constitutional roadblocks.

Anyone who has read *The Politics of Pensions* will immediately realize that Orloff's causal argument is much more sophisticated than this summary suggests. The three nominal explanatory factors listed above are merely aggregated summaries of constituent factors that are often specified in ordinal terms. For example, the explanatory factor of "state capability" used to account for pre-World War I differences between Britain, on the one hand, and the United States and Canada, on the other, is actually composed of several subvariables, including degree of patronage, extent to which state officials can negotiate policy reforms, and willingness of political elites to adopt social reform measures (e.g., pp. 302-3). When evaluated through ordinal comparison, the United States and Canada do not share the same score on several of these constituent explanatory variables, even though they experienced the same outcome (i.e., failure to adopt old-age coverage). For example, political elites in the United States were more strongly opposed to social spending than Canadian elites, and state officials in Canada had less capacity to negotiate policy reforms than U.S. state officials (pp. 253-58, 303). Like Skocpol, Orloff appears to have implicitly followed an additive strategy in which ordinal subvariables are summed together to generate a "total score" that underpins the dichotomous scoring of state capacity used in the nominal assessment. Hence, when all subvariables for state capacity are (informally) added together, the United States and Canada have similar total scores.

Narrative analysis is also a major component of the book's causal argument: Orloff further disaggregates subvariables into multiple events and processes that intersect to produce pension outcomes. For instance, the ordinal variable of "willingness of elites to adopt social reform" mentioned above is actually composed of several causally connected events. For the Canadian case, the causal chain would read something like this: late state development → limited national supervision of local poor relief efforts → limited awareness of need for social welfare reform → political elites lack interest in public social spending → little elite backing of spending measures (pp. 253-58). With the addition of narrative analysis, Orloff's argument becomes extremely complex. Indeed, because the book seeks to explain multiple outcomes (only Orloff's three most important outcomes were listed above), the reader is pushed to the limit to hold together the overall argument as Orloff moves not only from nominal to ordinal to narrative

of Boolean algebra (see pp. 23-38). Unfortunately, this entire discussion focuses on the nominal comparison, overlooking ordinal and narrative analysis altogether.

assessment but also from outcome to outcome.²⁸ For some readers, the extensive investment of time and energy needed to hold together the full argument may prove too taxing.

Ruth Berins Collier and David Collier's 877 page *Shaping the Political Arena* (1991) also demands much time and energy from the reader if its causal argument is to be seriously analyzed in the manner it warrants. When compared to most other macrocausal works, this book is distinctive because it first uses *ordinal* comparison to assess highly aggregated causal variables and then disaggregates these macrovariables into constituent variables that are assessed using *nominal* comparison. These constituent nominal variables are then further evaluated using narrative analysis. Hence, Collier and Collier move from ordinal to nominal to narrative appraisal.²⁹

Collier and Collier's main argument shows how different labor incorporation periods in eight Latin American countries set in motion a chain of political events that led to major contrasts in the character of national party systems. The authors identify four types of labor incorporation periods that reflect ordinal contrasts in the "mode and scope" of incorporation: state incorporation, electoral mobilization by a traditional party, labor populism, and radical populism. Although these four types of incorporation periods explicitly reflect a rank ordering, each type is formally defined in terms of constituent dimensions that are measured dichotomously (see pp. 166–67).³⁰ These constituent dimensions are used in the analysis as *variables* to help explain contrasts among the cases. In this way, when incorporation periods are disaggregated into subvariables, Collier and Collier in effect move from ordinal to nominal appraisal.³¹

This distinctive approach has interesting implications for the question of probabilistic versus deterministic causation. First, because Collier and Collier's most general argument employs ordinal comparison, the authors are well positioned to treat causation as partial and probabilistic at the

²⁸ Orloff (1993) also uses the method of agreement to explain similarities between the three cases (e.g., she attempts to locate the "necessary and sufficient conditions" for the adoption of welfare programs in the three countries [p. 36; see also pp. 299–301]). Furthermore, another entire set of comparisons for the United States and Canada involve longitudinal assessments of change over time (p. 35).

²⁹ A similar methodological approach is used (implicitly) in Sohrabi (1995).

³⁰ Collier and Collier are quick to point out (1991, p. 163), however, that the dichotomous categories do not fit every case perfectly.

³¹ Collier and Collier's analysis is actually even more complex than this suggests: nominal constituent variables are sometimes also assessed using ordinal comparison. Thus, Collier and Collier (1991) not only move from ordinal comparison to nominal comparison by disaggregating macrovariables but also return to ordinal comparison in their assessment of disaggregated variables.

macrolevel. Indeed, Collier and Collier explicitly state that incorporation periods are “explanatory factors that must be looked at in conjunction with other explanations and as important explanations that make certain outcomes more likely, but not inevitable” (p. 20; see also pp. 38–39, 511). For the Colliers, “the relationships under analysis are probabilistic and partial” (p. 20). Second, ordinal assessment at the macrolevel leads the authors to have more difficulty eliminating alternative explanations than do scholars who employ nominal comparison at the macrolevel. Collier and Collier must acknowledge that many other variables, including variables not analyzed in their work, probably played an important role in producing the outcomes under investigation.

Third, at lower levels of conceptual aggregation, including in the narrative assessment, the argument often reads more deterministically. Nominal comparison lurks just beneath the macroordinal argument, and this type of comparison contributes to a sense that many development processes were structurally determined by the type of incorporation period a country experienced. For example, important contrasts on dichotomously measured outcomes between cases of labor populism and cases of incorporation by a traditional party can be traced back to a single dichotomous dimension that distinguishes the two types of incorporation periods.³² Hence, in contrast to Skocpol, Orloff, and Downing, Collier and Collier’s book often reads more deterministically when macrovariables are disaggregated into constituent variables.

CONCLUSION

Macrocausal analysis has often been characterized as following a single strategy of causal inference (e.g., Skocpol and Somers 1980; Skocpol 1984; Lieberman 1991). Yet, in fact, at least three different strategies of causal appraisal—nominal comparison, ordinal comparison, and narrative analysis—are used. In some cases, a study may employ only one of the strategies; more commonly, it will draw on two, or sometimes all three. Since the alternative strategies have been combined in diverse ways, a spectrum of different approaches characterizes contemporary macrocausal analyses. By way of conclusion, it is appropriate to summarize the varying merits and shortcomings of these different approaches.

³² The dichotomous outcomes considered are: whether the party that oversaw labor incorporation was subordinate in the new regime established following the incorporation period, whether the union movement was linked to the center, and whether centrist parties had a majority in the electoral arena. The dichotomous variable that ultimately explains these differences is whether the political party that led the incorporation period established a strong organizational link to the union movement.

When used by themselves, nominal, ordinal, and narrative strategies have their own strengths and weaknesses (see table 4). The three strategies might be viewed along a continuum: nominal comparison tends to yield parsimonious and deterministic explanations, ordinal comparison tends to yield less parsimonious and less deterministic explanations, and narrative analysis tends to yield idiographic and contingent explanations. Because of such differences, the strategies are partly in tension with one another. And when two or more of them are combined, these tensions may rise to the surface. At the same time, however, the combination of strategies can serve to balance out the respective biases and blind spots of each. Combining strategies therefore leads to a complex set of trade-offs.

Perhaps the most widely employed combination involves the simultaneous use of nominal and narrative appraisal. This combination is appealing because it enables the investigator to develop an argument that is parsimonious yet shows great sensitivity to historical detail. In this sense, practitioners of a nominal-narrative combination can claim to bring together the virtues of both sociology and history. However, they do so by resolving the tension between nominal and narrative strategies in favor of the former: narratives are structured around the nominal argument and thus tend to read deterministically. Nevertheless, to the degree one believes macrocausal analysts should think about causation in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions, this combination may hold the most promise for research.³³

The approach of combining ordinal and narrative analysis has been adopted less frequently by scholars, which is unfortunate given that it offers a powerful means of assessing causality. Ordinal comparison is an important tool for evaluating *partial* causation, and this strategy blends well with narrative analysis: narrative becomes the means through which the analyst identifies the specific scores on variables that combine to produce the outcome of interest. The shortcoming of an ordinal-narrative combination is that it lacks nominal eliminative tools, and thus it becomes difficult to develop a parsimonious explanation. Yet, for scholars who reject the deterministic assumptions of nominal comparison, an ordinal-narrative combination offers an attractive alternative.

Although narrative has recently received much attention in the field of historical sociology, some recent works adopt a nominal-ordinal combination. This combination enables the researcher to direct full attention to testing hypotheses through logical, cross-case comparisons without allowing the argument to become “bogged down” in the minutia of narrative detail. When done well, this strategy can lead to arguments that are

³³ Ragin and Zaret (1983), Ragin (1987), and Skocpol (1984) advocate this understanding of causation.

TABLE 4
 APPROACHES TO MACROCAUSAL ANALYSIS: STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES

	Strength	Weakness
Nominal strategy	Contributes to explanatory parsimony	Entails a deterministic view of causation
Ordinal strategy	Allows for the assessment of partial causation	Cannot easily eliminate rival explanations
Narrative strategy	Permits processual analysis of temporally sequenced events	Can produce idiographic analyses
Nominal-narrative combination	Develops parsimonious explanations grounded in a sensitivity to historical detail	Explanation and narrative account tend toward determinism
Ordinal-narrative combination	Blends probabilistic causal assessment with meaningful narrative account	Explanation may appear to be causally indeterminate
Nominal-ordinal combination	Offers a thorough and logically compelling causal assessment	Explanation is subject to the criticism of "freezing history"
Nominal-ordinal-narrative combination	Serves to partially balance out characteristic weakness of each strategy	Complexity of explanation may contribute to a loss of parsimony

especially rigorous in their comparative-causal logic. However, as advocates of narrative strategies of causal inference would be quick to point out, much is lost with the exclusion of narrative analysis. Indeed, the nominal-ordinal combination is highly vulnerable to charges of freezing history and ignoring processes of sequencing and historical contingency.

Finally, scholars have combined and will continue to combine all three strategies. Works that adopt this triple combination embody the characteristic weaknesses of each of the three strategies, and, as we saw with the Skocpol example, it is possible to criticize such works from a variety of perspectives. However, these works also embody the characteristic strengths of each strategy. Provided readers recognize that all three strategies are being used (something which has not been true with Skocpol), this approach can serve to balance out the respective biases of each strategy. In this sense, there is a strong argument to be made in favor of combining all three strategies. The drawback, however, is that the combination inevitably leads to explanations that encompass several layers of methodological complexity, and thus the overall argument may be difficult to grasp. For some scholars, the gains offered by this approach may not be worth the costs imposed by added methodological complexity.

Since each methodological strategy and combination carries its own strengths and limitations, no one approach is inherently better than the rest. This raises the issue of the procedure through which an analyst selects a given approach. Individual scholarly tastes and preferences no doubt play a major role in this selection process. For example, analysts who strongly value parsimony and are less concerned with avoiding causal determinism will be attracted to the nominal strategy. Investigators who reject deterministic methods, by contrast, will likely find virtues in ordinal and narrative strategies. In addition, analysts may employ the approach that is most congruent with their distinctive skills and talents, allowing them to showcase their academic strengths. For instance, the scholar who is highly skilled at writing detailed, eventful chronologies may well be drawn to the narrative strategy. In this regard, it is worth emphasizing that any of these approaches can be poorly applied; methodology is no substitute for investigator aptitude.

Yet, the decision to employ a particular approach is not simply a matter of scholarly tastes and skills; it is also structured by broader methodological considerations. For example, data limitations may not permit the use of ordinal comparison, especially if only two cases are selected for analysis (at least three observations on a variable are needed for ordinal analysis). Likewise, narrative analysis is quite difficult to carry out in relatively few pages and thus may be avoided in article-length publications. Furthermore, the nature of the research question posed by the investigator may influence which methodological approach is adopted. For instance, if an

analyst inquires about the causes of ordinal differences on some outcome variable, this investigator may well be drawn to an ordinal strategy in the overall causal argument. Likewise, for a particular research question, a given investigator may feel that it is impossible to capture the complexity of a causal pattern without a narrative assessment. Yet, for a different research question, this same investigator may feel that narrative analysis provides an unnecessarily complex approach to the assessment of a relatively simple causal pattern.

Finally, the adoption of a given approach may well be conditioned by ongoing research cycles within the field of macrocausal analysis. In their seminal discussion of "Uses of Comparative History in Macrosocial Inquiry," Skocpol and Somers (1980) suggested that alternative logics of comparative history might together form a research cycle among a community of scholars. There is a sense in which the different strategies of causal inference discussed here—though all fall within only one of Skocpol and Somers's logics (i.e., macrocausal analysis)—can also be seen in light of a research cycle. For example, macrocausal analysis might be seen as following a cycle in which the respective strengths and weaknesses of nominal, ordinal, and narrative strategies shape the overall evolution of research. The three-way debate between Sewell (1996*b*, pp. 254–62), Skocpol (1994, pp. 326–34), and Katznelson (1997, pp. 98–99) can be seen in this light. Sewell calls for scholars to adopt primarily narrative-based arguments to avoid the pitfalls of more formal comparative methods, Skocpol in turn defends nominal comparison as the most powerful strategy, and Katznelson encourages scholars to employ ordinal comparison as an alternative approach. This debate reflects important divisions within the macrocausal tradition, and there can be little doubt that broader research among macrocausal analysts is influenced by the playing out of such debates and by the strategy (or combination of strategies) that happens to be in ascendancy. Yet, when viewed from a larger perspective, the Sewell-Skocpol-Katznelson controversy can be seen in more complimentary terms: by advocating different approaches, scholars serve to check and balance the characteristic weaknesses and limitations of one another. In this sense, debates about method among macrocausal analysts help prevent any single approach from gaining unwarranted dominance and may serve to place each method within a larger complimentary research cycle.

Of course, the ways in which macrocausal analysis may or may not follow a general research cycle cannot be fully understood until analysts become more explicit and self-conscious about how they use nominal comparison, ordinal comparison, and narrative analysis. The failure to be methodologically self-conscious has contributed to charges that macrocausal analysts lack a sophisticated approach to causal analysis (e.g., Lieberman 1991; Kiser and Hechter 1991). In addition, the absence of

methodological explicitness has made it difficult for many readers to fully understand and appreciate the arguments of macrocausal researchers. This article has attempted to provide a foundation for greater methodological reflection among macrocausal analysts. As an accompaniment to a continuing large output of high-quality research, greater methodological awareness may be an antidote against abandoning the unfinished but promising agenda of macrocausal analysis.

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