

6

From Cases to Sites*Studying Global Processes in Comparative Politics*

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As a subfield of political science, comparative politics is often associated with the comparison of two or more independent and bounded cases. A case, in canonical textual definition and graduate student training, slides between two usages: (1) an instance of a more general class of processes or events or (2) a geographically bounded entity, usually a nation-state but sometimes a city, empire, or province. Neither of these usages is adequate. The former presupposes the membership of a particular phenomenon in a predesignated category. The latter imputes a bounded, enduring holism on what are deeply interdependent – and made and unmade – scales of political life.¹ The virtue of immersive inquiry is its potential to generate novel concepts and to classify events and processes in unexpected ways – which unsettles the first idea of a case. And such immersive inquiry often reveals the connections between political dynamics in one locale to dynamics that go beyond the geographic unit under investigation – thus unsettling the second.

Drawing on my research and engaging a range of methodological scholarship, I argue that the conventional treatment of case studies ignores their constitutive multiplicity. Any one event, institution, or process may belong to more than one category of political life. And any one locale is crosscut by, and co-constitutes, dynamics that exceed its geographic boundaries. In light of this multiplicity, I propose “siting” as an alternative to the conventional approach. Siting provides a framework to study global processes in the moments and scenes in which they unfold, drawing our attention to the co-constitution of particular places and macro processes.

My framework builds on Ragin’s and Soss’s discussions of casing (Ragin 1992; Soss, Chapter 5, this volume). The process of casing brings “operational closure to some problematic relationship between ideas and evidence, theory and data”

¹ On scale making, see Riofrancos (2017).

(Ragin 1992, 218). From this perspective, cases are neither self-evident geographic entities nor members of a predetermined class. Like casing, siting entails iterative encounters between empirical and theoretical knowledge. But my framework goes further, transcending the logic of cases altogether. Particular sites offer a view of the general not because they are *cases* of it, but because they are *constitutive* of it – along with many other sites across the world.

For example, the abstract structure we call “global capitalism” can be empirically observed by identifying its constitutive social relations – wage labor, the profit motive, private property, the commodity form – in the particular contexts in which they emerge, are institutionalized, and are contested.² As a corollary, we gain analytic and empirical leverage over abstract, global, and *longue durée* processes by conducting research in the sites where they are salient, observable, and conflictual.

In what follows, I first historicize the conventional comparative method, illuminating the conditions under which the comparison of discrete, independent nation-states became the standard of scientific rigor. Understanding this history is essential to appreciate the contribution of siting as an approach to political inquiry. As I show, the development of the comparative method is bound up with the trajectories of global capitalism, imperialism, and geopolitical conflict across the long twentieth century. Yet the conventional approach to comparison effaces its own global context. Siting, therefore, is a way to acknowledge – and analytically leverage – the always global character of political inquiry.

After recounting this intellectual history, I then zoom in on the status of “single cases” within this hegemonic approach to comparative inquiry. So-called single cases are instructive, given their ambivalent status in a field defined by comparison, because they reveal the key assumptions underlying the goals and criteria of research. On the one hand, they are deemed especially suited for key methodological tasks, such as hypothesis generation or explaining unusual but important historical events (Ragin 1992, 127; Brady and Collier 2004, 13–14; Mahoney and Goertz 2006, 240–41). And they are seen as more likely to meet criteria such as conceptual validity (Ragin 1992, 127; Brady and Collier 2004, 13–14; Mahoney and Goertz 2006, 240–41). On the other hand, they are regarded as an insufficient foundation for the conventionally accepted goal of social science inquiry: generalizable causal inferences.³ I suggest that this

² For example, see E. P. Thompson’s (1966) history of working-class consciousness; E. M. Wood’s (1998) account of the capitalist transformation of the English countryside; Karl Polanyi (1944) on the conflictual emergence of “market society”; Eric Williams (1944) on slavery and the development of capitalism; scholars in the tradition of world systems theory who analyze of the violent incorporation of territories as the peripheries of capitalism (Wallerstein 1974; Stern 1988; Svampa 2016); and studies of the privatization of land and commodification of social life in neoliberal Latin America (Silva 2009, 2012; Simmons 2016).

³ King, Keohane and Verba (1994) identify causal influence as the goal of inquiry, and, as discussed later, argue that the greater the number of observations – which is distinct from the number of cases, but not unrelated to it – the more confident our inferences (see chaps. 1 and 6

disciplinary ambivalence is a product of a misconception regarding the nature of single-case studies. Single cases are not “single” but rather marked by constitutive multiplicity.

But I also go further than reconceptualizing the case. As I have discovered in the course of my research, casing remains bound by the assumption that the phenomena we study are valuable only insofar as they serve as examples of something else. Instead, I argue for selecting research sites that are co-constitutive of a broader process of interest. I illustrate the methodological and substantive value of this approach with reference to my research on the global energy transition. I conclude by encouraging graduate students and junior scholars to work against the grain of comparative politics and embrace the intellectual rigor and creative potential of site-specific inquiry.

A GENEALOGY OF THE “COMPARATIVE METHOD”

In methodological handbooks, graduate and undergraduate seminars, and the obligatory methods section in journal articles, the comparative method is presented as a means to the overarching end of social-scientific inquiry: producing inferences that are generalizable across space and time (King, Keohane, and Verba 1994, chaps. 1–3, 6; Gerring 2004, 342; George and Bennett 2005, 6; Mahoney and Goertz 2006, 228); Gerring 2008, 645–46; Collier, Seawright, and Munck 2010, 25).⁴ This logic links a number of methodological operations: theorization, conceptualization, operationalization, hypothesis generation, case selection, identification of dependent and independent variables, data collection, data analysis, and hypothesis testing. The hegemonic status of this logic is only reaffirmed by the debates that take place on its terrain, upon which interventions assume that comparison is a route to generalizability and, therefore, that every step of comparative inquiry should be structured to obtain this desideratum. Overlaid on this understanding of the goal of comparative inquiry is a highly simplified understanding of the “scientific method” thought to govern experimental work, wherein the isolation, control, and manipulation of variation is the *sine qua non* of producing general knowledge.

Of course, this goal of using comparison to generalize has a history – a history that is crucial to understand to appreciate the theoretical and empirical value of shifting from a logic of comparing cases to a logic of studying sites.⁵ The comparative method carves up the world into discrete cases, abstracts those cases out of their mutually entangled histories, and then brings them into commensurate relation with one another. As I discuss in the

⁴ In particular, see King, Keohane and Verba’s (1994) statements on pages 38 and 45, where they use the language of “universal applicability” of their standards to interpretivist and historical work; otherwise “our interpretations would remain personal rather than scientific.”

⁵ I develop this historical account at more length in Riofrancos (2018).

next section, the further disaggregation of cases into “observations,” unmoored from their conjunctural interdependency and divorced from historical time, takes this analytic operation to its extreme. For those of us trained in conventional social science, studying the sites that constitute and are constituted by macro processes requires unlearning this mode of inquiry. And the first step in unlearning is reinserting methodology back into history. As it turns out, the comparative logic is itself a product of, and protagonist in, the world-historic processes its application tends to disavow: imperialism, racial capitalism, and geopolitical conflicts. The comparative method, in other words, is itself a fruitful research site to understand the co-constitution of knowledge and power over the long twentieth century.

As a strategy to render social phenomena intelligible (and predictable), the logic of comparative inquiry emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in a trans-Atlantic milieu marked by a series of interrelated macrosocial transformations: capitalist industrialization and the spread of market society, the growth of state bureaucracies, the consolidation of national identities, and imperial conquest and domination. It was this last process that most decisively shaped the origins of the comparative method in sociology. Rather than an internal reflection on the experience of capitalist modernity within the metropole, Victorian-era sociology primarily applied the comparative method externally to the rest of the world – as seen from the synoptic point of view of the “imperial gaze” (Connell 1997, 1524). Sociologists synthesized the data produced by now sprawling colonial administrations (what Raewyn Connell calls “the ethnographical dividend of empire”) and ordered the world’s societies in terms of their “progress,” conceived of in evolutionary and often explicitly racialized terms (Connell 1997, 1520). Meanwhile, as Jessica Blatt’s disciplinary history reveals, a racialized understanding of political development constituted the primary concern of early twentieth-century American political science (Blatt 2018, 54). Racialized typologies and the comparisons they enabled issued from Eurocentric “ideal types” against which the rest of the world was less evolved, backward, or deviant (Tilly 1984, chap. 1; Connell 1997; Steinmetz 2004, 381, 387–89; Blatt 2018, 46–76).⁶ Thus, the conceptual boundaries of the taken-for-granted unit of comparison – the nation-state – efface the always already global character of both social scientific theory and the imperial states in which they were developed (Bhambra 2016).

During the interwar period, American sociology turned inward (as exemplified by the Chicago School’s model of urban sociology) and political science assumed the task of globe-trotting comparison. Under the rubric of modernization theory and armed with ever more sophisticated quantitative

⁶ See also Fredric Jameson’s analysis of the link between uneven capitalist development and conceptual categories that facilitated comparison (namely, the category of the “mode of production”) (Jameson 1989, 37–38).

From Cases to Sites

111

methods, postwar comparative politics aimed for a “total science” of the world’s diverse “political systems” (Mitchell 1991, 79). Echoing the nineteenth-century imperial gaze – although now inflected with the sense of uncertainty and urgency that permeated the Cold War-era policy and research establishment – political science sought to expand the territorial reach of its analysis and dutifully enlisted in the battle against communism to export Anglo-American institutions and “civic culture” (Pletsch 1981, 584–85; Mitchell 1991, 79–80; Oren 2003). The geopolitical and conceptual partition of the globe into three worlds further reinforced the contours of Cold War-era political science. The division that structured the world into friend (first), enemy (second), and contested terrain (third) also marked an academic division of labor: anthropologists studied the inescapably unique cultures of the not-yet-modern third world, whereas sociology, economics, and political science studied those countries that could be located somewhere along the teleological trajectory of modernization and therefore conformed in greater or lesser degree to the quasi-natural laws governing modern societies (Pletsch 1981, 579–83). From this comes the mutual opposition between studies that produce knowledge of specific cultural systems (“idiographic”) versus those that produced knowledge in the form of generalizable laws (“nomothetic”). This binary is almost exclusively deployed to denigrate the knowledge produced by single-case studies, which are presumed to be inherently “non-explanatory” – no matter that its twin terms are archaic vestiges of nineteenth-century German debates over the status of general theories in social science (Steinmetz 2004, 382–83).

Even as the specific content of modernization theory has ostensibly fallen out of favor, its goal of a “total science” and its positivist epistemology continued to shape the methodological contours of political science, as well as privilege certain objects of research over others. Beginning in the 1970s, in comparative sociology and comparative politics, the search for timeless laws of modernization – themselves a projection of an imagined Western past – gave way to a historical approach to the study of capitalism, the state, regime type, and social revolutions (Sewell 2005, 81–83). A new canon coalesced around Barrington Moore Jr., Theda Skocpol, Charles Tilly, and others, yielding an approach equally defined by its substantive and methodological orientations. For these studies, where the number of cases fell below the threshold for statistical methods, “comparison” became a marker of social scientific rigor (Hall 2003, 379–81; Steinmetz 2004, 373–81). For example, in his influential article in the *American Political Science Review*, Lijphart framed the comparative method as second best to statistical analysis when there are too few cases to perform a regression analysis (Lijphart 1971). Key to what Calhoun (1996) refers to as the gradual “domestication” of historical sociology was the emphasis on comparison (specifically John Stuart Mill’s methods of agreement and difference) as a route to generalizable causal inference.⁷ Brubaker refers to

⁷ For a canonical methodological statement, see Skocpol and Somers (1980).

this as the “Skocpolian moment,” and its relative success can be seen in the strong association of comparison and conception of the nation-state as the unit of analysis, as well as the understanding of comparison as a distinctive method and logic, rather than a dimension of a variety of logics of inquiry (Brubaker 2003, 3–4).

The hegemonic status of the method of structured comparison is perhaps most apparent in the conventional treatment of single-case studies, which seem to defy the maxim that the more cases, and the more observations, the more generalizable a study’s findings. In the next section, I closely read canonical methodological texts and their equally canonical responses. I show that the assumptions underlying the injunction to “increase the n” – in the service of a total science and the political projects it advances – are tenuous. Finally, I present an alternative approach that leverages rather than negates the interconnections between the many specific sites of macro processes.

FROM CASES TO SITES IN COMPARATIVE POLITICS

King, Keohane, and Verba’s (1994) *Designing Social Inquiry* – among the most frequently assigned texts in contemporary methodology courses – is a key source of the prevailing assumptions about what single-case studies can (and cannot) be used for. *Designing Social Inquiry* routinely characterizes small-n studies, and single-case studies most acutely, as providing a weak foundation for what they regard as the primary research goal of the comparative method: generalizable descriptive and causal inferences. Indeed, a reasonable interpretation of this text might suggest that single-case studies are entirely unsuited to the tasks of social science. As King, Keohane, and Verba somewhat blithely put it, the imperative to select cases that vary on the dependent variable – and thus to refrain from only selecting case(s) that register a “positive” value on the outcome of interest, whether revolution or democratization – ought to be “so obvious that we would think it hardly needs to be mentioned” (King, Keohane, and Verba 1994, 129). They go as far as to say that without such variation, “*nothing whatsoever can be learned* about the causes of the dependent variable” (129, emphasis added): given the possibility of omitted variable bias, research conducted on a single case is prone to Type II error (false rejection of the null hypothesis) (Gerring and Seawright 2008). In other words, such research is ostensibly biased toward verification. Their advice for addressing the “extreme selection bias” induced by no-variation case selection strategies: “Avoid them!” (Gerring and Seawright 2008, 130).

The way to do so, naturally, is to increase the number of cases. As a graduate student conducting fieldwork on conflict over resource extraction in Ecuador, I cannot count the number of times a well-meaning professor suggested I add additional cases, even if admittedly superficial “shadow cases.” But as other methodologists have argued, if the goal is to explain a historically important outcome in a given case, it makes little sense to treat all cases as “equally

relevant” and seek out negative values on the outcome in question to maximize variation (Mahoney and Goertz 2006, 239–41). In addition, the condition of equifinality – that there are multiple paths to the “same” outcome, and that these distinct pathways are of analytic interest – suggests that “selecting on the dependent variable” contributes to our understandings of the *processes and mechanisms* by which seemingly identical outcomes emerge (Ragin 1992, 33–35; George and Bennett 2005, 12–13).

More broadly, graduate students and junior scholars constantly face the imperative to increase the number of observations, thus establishing (at least according to the conventional wisdom in the discipline) a solid foundation for descriptive and ultimately causal inference. As King, Keohane, and Verba (1994, 52, 221) make clear, the number of cases does not per se dictate the number of observations, and even a “handful of cases” can contain an “immense” number of observations. Regardless of this immensity, their advice to case study researchers is to unrelentingly increase the “n.”⁸ And as one makes advances in their research, the discovery of new testable implications of the theory only amplifies the imperative to include more cases: any hypotheses revised in the process of testing *must* be tested on new data.⁹

King, Keohane, and Verba’s final chapter, aptly entitled “Increasing the Number of Observations,” suggests various means of doing so, organized into two basic categories: new measures and new units. Either the same units can be subjected to new measures, or new units (including at a lower level of aggregation than the initial unit) can be analyzed – or both. Curiously, however, whichever route to generalizability is chosen, *cases* lose their usual integrity and become a mere collection of observations. Indeed, the authors find that the term “case” “has a fairly imprecise definition” and that while the number of cases “may be of some interest for some purposes,” only the number of observations is relevant to testing a theory (King, Keohane, and Verba 1994, 52–53). Elsewhere, they emphasize that cases (whether defined as countries or as phenomena such as revolutions, elections, or wars) are not actually what we study: “Rather, we abstract aspects of those phenomena – sets of explanatory and dependent variables – that are specified by our theories; we identify units to which these variables apply; and we make observations of our variables, on the units” (King, Keohane, and Verba 1994, 217–18). This assumes, of course, that all (theoretically relevant) observations are the same insofar as they are equally valuable in the service of inference. In contrast, Brady, Collier, and Seawright (2004, 11–12) distinguish between dataset and causal process observations, noting that case study approaches are particularly well situated to increase the latter (and thus attend to causal complexity and multiple causality).¹⁰

⁸ George and Bennett (2005, 17) somewhat humorously refer to this imperative as a product of “our ‘bigger is better’ culture.”

⁹ I discuss this rule in more depth later.

¹⁰ For causal complexity and multiple causality, see Ragin 1992, 133–35.

However, King, Keohane, and Verba (1994, 12–14) do distinguish between “old” and “new” observations. They assert that hypotheses, whether based on existing literature or preliminary research, must be developed and then tested on new data. Ditto if any modification of one’s theory that makes it more restrictive occurs in the process of research (22). The concern about verification assumes a sharp temporal and conceptual distinction between the generation and validation of hypotheses. Proponents of case studies tend to reproduce this same distinction, which underlies their arguments regarding the unique advantages of such research designs. Methodological textbooks and articles assert that studies of a single or few cases are uniquely suited to maximize research goals other than the validation of hypotheses: conceptual (internal) validity, hypothesis generation, the falsification of deterministic theories, the identification of causal pathways and causal mechanisms, and the modeling of complex causal relationships (Rueschemeyer 2003; George and Bennett 2005; Seawright and Gerring 2008). Given the particular advantages – and, as a corollary, limitations – of case studies, scholars of qualitative methods frame the decision over the number and type of case(s) in terms of a trade-off that hinges on the particular research goals and object of study (Lijphart 1971; George and Bennett 2005; Seawright and Gerring 2008).

To ease this trade-off, scholars are encouraged to take a “strategic” approach to case selection. For example, Seawright and Gerring’s typology suggests a “deviant” case to generate new hypotheses and a “typical” case to test existing ones (Gerring and Seawright 2008).¹¹ On the one hand, such typologies restore integrity and internal complexity to cases. Cases are not merely sets of observations, nor are they “homogenous units”: they are qualitatively *different* from one another and therefore exist in distinct relationship to bodies of theories. On the other hand, the language of such labels explicitly reproduces the same statistical logic underlying King, Keohane, and Verba’s framework. As George and Bennett (2005, 69) state, the first step of case selection is identifying “the universe – that is, the class or subclass of events – of which a single case or group of cases to be studied are instances.”¹²

In addition to reproducing a statistical logic, the very idea of case selection relies on a realist epistemology in which cases self-evidently exist as members of a universe (Ragin 1992; Soss, Chapter 5, this volume).¹³ Drawing on Ragin, Soss inverts this logic – which he refers to as “studying a case” – with an approach that foregrounds casing as an activity throughout the research process – “casing a study” (Soss, Chapter 5, this volume). Both Ragin and Soss reject the split temporality of generation and validation of hypotheses in favor of seeing both processes as interwoven throughout research and analysis.

¹¹ See also Flyvbjerg (2001) for a critique of the statistical logic of case selection.

¹² See Gerring (2004, 645–46) for a similar statement.

¹³ For further discussion of the point about statistical logic, see Flyvbjerg (2001, 88–90); Small (2004, 6).

At each moment where hypotheses and data meet, there is a reciprocal encounter and an opportunity for casing (Ragin 1992, 217–20; Soss, Chapter 5, this volume). And casing can occur within the bounds of what would generally be considered the case itself, in ways that might lead to the reclassification of the most macro-level unit of analysis. Conceptual innovation within the bounds of the case may result in a new answer to the question: *What is this an instance of?*

The ongoing process of casing also calls into question the case study's ostensible "bias toward verification." As Flyvbjerg argues, "The advantage of the case study is that it can 'close in' on real-life situations and test views directly in relation to phenomena as they unfold in practice [and therefore] it is falsification, not verification, that characterizes the case study" (Flyvbjerg 2006, 235).¹⁴ As recounted in many ethnographies and archival studies, the experience of field research is marked by a constant re-examination of one's preliminary arguments and their conceptual foundations. The process of re-examination can be prompted by, for example, an unforeseen turn of events, the discovery that a previously unknown actor or institution had a pivotal role in a process under study, or learning from fellow academics and intellectuals in the field. This latter type of interaction problematizes the hierarchical binary of analyst and informant: as I have discovered time and again in my fieldwork, my "subjects" were of course themselves "analysts" of their social world, or what Marcus calls "paraethnographers" (Marcus 1995; see also Riles 2000). For interpretive social science more generally, interpretation is both a technique of analysis and, as enacted by the actors we study, a "linchpin of . . . social life" (Glaeser 2010, xvii).¹⁵ We interpret interpretations, translating "in and out" of the "frames of meaning within which actors orient their conduct" and the "frames of meaning involved in sociological theories" (Garcelon 2005, 17).

For these reasons, the term "single-case study" is a misnomer. A single-case study is constitutively multiple: a case is always *of* more than one kind. The researcher's ongoing attempts to case a study are one way to attend to this multiplicity. A second approach is an analytic process I refer to as "siting." In contrast to the bounded holism that "case" can imply, a *site* is a particular place where we can observe a broader process unfolding. Capitalism, energy systems, indigenous mobilization, the climate crisis, settler colonialism, the supply chains of production and distribution, migration, citizenship and belonging, and resurgent right-wing authoritarianism: all of these processes defy national boundaries, several of them are global in scope, and all can be fruitfully studied

¹⁴ For a critique of "verification" as the goal of case study analysis, see Burawoy (2009), who argues that the goal is theoretical reconstruction (or improvement) rather than validation or invalidation of a preexisting theory.

¹⁵ This is what Giddens termed the "double hermeneutic," and what Garcelon rephrased the "double narrativity" of the social sciences. See Garcelon (2005, 17, cf. fn. 68); Giddens (1984, 284; 1987, 30–31); Rabinow (1986).

in particular times and places.¹⁶ If casing continually re-situates a study vis-à-vis other theories, concepts, and empirical studies, then siting offers a different perspective on the relationship between the specific and the general. Instead of seeing those places as particular instances of a more general category – even, as Ragin (1992) and Soss (Chapter 5, this volume) make clear, of multiple general categories simultaneously – we can see them as particularly fertile sites for studying broader structures and processes that spatially and temporally exceed the sites in question. Siting thus rejects the boundedness that the term “case” assumes. In this vein, and referring to his research on ethnic identity in a Transylvanian city, Brubaker writes: “The Cluj project is not a *case study*, but a *place study*. Cluj is not a *unit of analysis* studied in isolation from (or, except tangentially, even in comparison to) other coordinate units. Cluj is rather a *strategic research site* for studying processes that are of more general theoretical interest” (2003, 1, emphasis in original). Studying sites rather than cases is a way to call into question, rather than analytically reinforce, boundedness: “We don’t want to *presuppose* that entitativity or groupness by inscribing it into the very terms in which we pose our research questions” (1). Indeed, even cultural anthropologists, whose ethnographic method has long been associated with the focus on a relatively bounded field site, must contend with the increasing interpenetration and co-constitution of the local and the global (Comaroff and Comaroff 2003, 153–58). If the “foundational fiction” of a closed community is no longer theoretically or empirically tenable, the question of comparison reemerges in a different form (153).

One compelling approach to reformulating comparison along these lines includes the research designs that Tilly refers to as “encompassing comparisons.” These “select locations within the structure or process and explain similarities or differences among those locations as consequences of their relationships to the whole” (Tilly 1984, 125).¹⁷ Encompassing comparisons leverage rather than disavow global interconnectedness. But they also contain “a great danger”: the temptation of functionalist explanations, whereby the outcomes observed in the unit of interest are wholly attributed to that unit’s purpose in a larger, organically construed whole (125–26).¹⁸ Encompassing comparisons thus overcomes the pitfalls of conventional comparisons and simultaneously reproduces them at a higher scale. As McMichael points out, encompassing comparisons takes for granted the “systemic unit and unit cases within which historical observation takes place,” in effect removing “the unit of analysis from theoretical contention” (McMichael 1990, 389). In other words, this mode of analysis assumes a priori

¹⁶ Scholarship in the paradigm of “planetary urbanization” and “global cities” takes a similar approach to the study of multi-scalar and transnational processes. See Brenner (2014); Sassen (2014).

¹⁷ See also Schwedler, Chapter 9, this volume.

¹⁸ For discussion of this risk, see McMichael (1990, especially pp. 388–89).

the systemic logic, geographic contours, and temporal bounds of the whole to which unit cases belong – rather than interrogating how these three features are co-constituted by a multi-scalar, dynamic whole and its many parts. Such an interrogation would entail rethinking the whole as an “emergent totality ... discovered through the mutual conditioning of its parts” (391). What McMichael refers to as “incorporated comparisons” take emergence and co-constitution as their point of departure. Such comparisons can occur in two forms: diachronic – discrete but related moments of a process unfolding over time – and synchronic – a cross-sectional analysis of a snapshot of a social configuration (389).

Sites capture both of these dimensions. Global processes – capitalism, energy systems, migration – develop unevenly across space and time, allowing for myriad opportunities to study the co-constitution of sites and macro processes. In any given locale, a researcher might investigate how the process in question interacts with preexisting political institutions, partisan alignments, social organizations, economic livelihoods, or cultural identities (a spatial “conjuncture” in McMichael’s terms). The researcher could also investigate how these locally or nationally territorialized dynamics in turn reshape the unfolding of the global process under study, with consequences beyond the aforementioned local or national scales (a temporal “process” for McMichael). For example, imagine a planned extractive project that would contaminate water, negatively impacting agricultural livelihoods in a particular region of a country. The affected community stages a protest in response, thus imperiling the project’s feasibility and causing investors to renegotiate their contract with the national government and/or scout potential locations in other countries with similar resource endowments. Either of these corporate responses could potentially reshape the global political economy and geography of resource extraction – effects amplified by the fact that the company’s decision would likely influence the actions of other extractive firms.

Ultimately, the approach of siting leaves it up to the scholar’s research questions and goals whether the emphasis is placed on temporal trajectory or spatial conjuncture – or both. In addition, I also contribute to McMichael’s approach with concrete advice for selecting and analyzing sites, grounded in my own reflexive process of siting and re-siting my research on the global energy transition. In the remainder of this chapter, I draw on my work on the global energy transition to illustrate the iterative process of siting and conclude with transportable lessons for research projects on other global processes.

SITING AND RE-SITING THE GLOBAL RENEWABLE ENERGY TRANSITION

Climate change is obviously a planetary condition; meanwhile, the energy transition that is required to mitigate the worst emissions scenarios, and their consequences for societies and ecosystems, is often conceived in domestic terms.

But the material infrastructure of a transition from hydrocarbon to renewable energy involves processes of extraction, manufacture, and distribution that exceed national boundaries. Wind turbines, solar panels, and lithium batteries – to name three of the key technologies needed to effectuate an energy transition – are produced and traded via global supply chains.¹⁹ My research centers on the last of these technologies, which is essential for two aspects of the energy transition: powering electric vehicles and storing energy in renewable grids (Riofrancos 2019). Specifically, I trace the socio-environmental consequences and complex political economy of lithium extracted from the salt flats of northern Chile, one of the primary exporters of lithium for the global market. But I do not take this larger unit of analysis – the global market – for granted. Instead, studying the early phase of an emergent and contested set of interlocking markets – lithium, batteries, electric vehicles, and utility-scale storage – reveals the ongoing work of situated actors to transform a natural resource into a commodity, secure financing for extractive projects, forge the links in a complex supply chain, and implement policies to generate demand for green technologies in a world that remains on the precipice of an energy transition with an uncertain future. In such a context, the dynamics at local and national scales – protest, policy making, geological conditions, contract negotiations – co-constitute the larger whole to which they belong.

The first phase of this project consisted of four months of fieldwork, encompassing the nexus of policy making, corporate headquarters, and elite networks in the capital, Santiago, as well as contention over lithium extraction in the Atacama Desert, the sector that affects ecosystems and indigenous communities and exacerbates water scarcity in one of the driest places on Earth. I conducted interviews and ethnographic observation, simultaneously tracking the global market dynamics and conflictual geopolitics of this relatively nascent industry. I initially engaged in the iterative process of casing and re-casing described earlier – but, as I gained more experience and brainstormed with colleagues, I shifted my analytic gaze to identify the lithium sector in Chile not as a *case* of a more general *category* but as the multi-scalar *site* of global *structures and processes*.

At first, my instinct was to treat lithium extraction in Chile as a case of the extractive frontiers of the renewable transition, in a comparative framework that would include Bolivia and Argentina (neighboring countries that also contain significant lithium reserves), as well as such extractive frontiers further afield, from cobalt in the Democratic Republic of Congo to rare-earth mining in Inner Mongolia. However, the more I learned about the global supply

¹⁹ For critical social science approaches to the study of supply chains, which trace their intellectual lineage to the “commodity chains” approach of world systems theory (Hopkins and Wallerstein 1986), see, for example, Hopkins and Wallerstein (1986); Bair (2005); Tsing (2009); Cowen (2014); Arboleda (2020); For a recent study of the environmental impacts of green technology supply chains, see Sovacool et al. (2020).

From Cases to Sites

119

chains of the renewable transition – and the emergent forms of political contention along them – the less I saw my study as one case among many and the more I saw it as a particularly fertile site to interrogate the global renewable energy transition that is underway, unevenly and unequally, around the world.

This shift in perspective brought into view unexpected connections across historical time and spatial scales. From this vantage point, the lithium sector bore the traces of Pinochet's brutal dictatorship (1973–1990), Cold War-era concerns about nuclear development, and more than a century of resource extraction (first sodium nitrate, then copper, and most recently lithium) in northern Chile. Meanwhile, forces beyond Chile's borders played a key role in constructing, and contesting, this nascent sector: lithium companies deciding where to invest; increasing market concentration and interlocking ownership of projects; the growing role of Chinese capital in South America; governments in the United States, Europe, and China vying for control over battery and electric vehicle manufacture and the raw materials needed for each; and indigenous and environmental activists beginning to coordinate their resistance across the Andean plateau that encompasses northern Chile and Argentina and southern Bolivia.

This is not to collapse the local and global, or to assert that states do not matter. Quite the contrary: contract negotiations, environmental and water regulations, labor laws, and the territorial rights of indigenous communities are all deeply shaped by national policy making, and quite relevant to the dynamics under study. But analyzing the contentious development of the lithium sector in Chile as a *site* of a broader process rather than a *case* of a more general category has been illuminating. For example, my close tracking of corporate discourse, via social media and industry news sites alerted me to a new strategy on the part of electric vehicles manufacturers. Concerned about supplies of battery-grade lithium, firms such as Volkswagen, Tesla, and BMW are entering into direct agreements with lithium mining companies. This is in effect a forced “vertical integration” of the supply chain, tightening the links between “upstream” extraction and “downstream” vehicle production. While this ensures firms' access to battery materials, it also generates new risks: if communities protest or workers strike at a lithium mine covered by such an agreement, the effects of the protest will reverberate all the way down the chain, impacting the shop floor of the electric vehicle manufacturer. In other words, vertical integration amplifies the effects of supply disruptions – and gives communities and workers leverage over key chokepoints in the global economy. Mitchell (2011, chap. 1) called this power “sabotage”; in his book *Carbon Democracy*, he demonstrates how early twentieth-century coal workers were able to win major concessions from firms and governments by shutting down industrial economies at the source of the energy that powered them.²⁰

²⁰ For additional analysis of supply chain governance and disruption, see Arboleda (2020) and Cowen (2014).

While these dynamics are still quite nascent in the lithium sector, siting encourages attention to precisely such junctures where the local and the global co-constitute. From the indigenous territory and otherworldly salt flats of the Atacama Desert, to the rechargeable battery manufacturing hub in Jiangsu province, China, to Washington, DC, where US government officials meet with electric vehicle manufacturers to ensure the supply of raw materials, lithium offers a window into the uneven, and unequal, contours of the global energy transition.

SELECTING SITES

The reflexive processes of siting and re-siting described earlier offer lessons to scholars embarking on research projects that cut against the grain of conventional comparison. All global structures encompass multiple sites, but some sites are more analytically and methodologically fruitful than others. Although choosing sites is inevitably a trial-and-error process of false leads and unexpected discoveries, I propose three criteria to guide selection: observable, salient, and contentious.

First, the macrostructure ought to be empirically *observable* at the locale and scale in question, whether accessed in documentary form, elicited in interviews with identifiable actors, or observed in real time through participant observation – or, ideally, some combination of the three. Second, the macrostructure ought to be politically *salient* in the chosen context, meaning that it is (or, for historical studies, was) a topic of live interest to situated actors, a subject of policy making or social mobilization, and an area discussed in public fora and disseminated in mass media outlets – and/or among specific “counterpublics” to which the researcher has access.²¹ Third, I recommend that sites be chosen where the process in question is the subject of *contention*. The analytic utility of conflict is that it reveals global processes to be the outcome of interventions on the part of actors located in specific sites, driven by complex interests and ideologies, and situated on an asymmetric terrain. In other words, attention to conflict highlights the emergent and dynamic qualities of whole-part relations.

In addition to these three criteria, I suggest that scholars view empirical reality through a bifocal lens. By tacking back and forth between gathering data on specific sites and on the global processes that spatially and temporally exceed them, we can glimpse the global in the local, simultaneously attending to the specific times and places that the global is produced.

In my research on the supply chains of the renewable energy transition, I chose to begin by siting my project in Chile precisely because the dynamics

²¹ As defined by Fattal, counterpublics are “a subset of publics that stand in conscientious opposition to a dominant ideology and strategically subvert that ideology’s construction in public discourse.” See Fattal (2018), and also Warner (2002).

From Cases to Sites

121

around lithium – a key component of this transition – are observable, salient, and contentious. In Chile, lithium is a topic of policy making and economic investment. In addition, since successive Chilean governments have taken an interest in promoting lithium development, state actors are willing to discuss this policy arena with a researcher. At the same time, groups more critical of the lithium sector – from labor unions to leftist politicians to indigenous and environmental activists – have staged demonstrations and issued communiqués. Relatedly, lithium extraction has occasioned multiple forms of contention: protests, partisan disputes over policy, debates among market actors as to whether lithium counts as a “commodity,” and competition between states vying for control over the electric vehicle supply chain. The observable, salient, and contentious nature of lithium in Chile made it an ideal first site for this research project.

As I move forward, I will select additional sites guided by the same criteria. For example, the US Congress and the Biden administration are currently making moves to expand the extraction and development of “critical minerals” such as lithium within US borders, in a bid to control more of the electric vehicle supply chain. In response, environmental groups are already warning about the effects of extraction in desert regions such as northern Nevada – and investors are eyeing opportunities for expanded domestic manufacturing of batteries and electric cars. For these reasons, specific sites in the United States – Washington, DC, as the location of elite decision making and Western states slated for potential lithium projects – are next on my list to study this emergent global process.

CONCLUSION

Graduate students and junior scholars who do fieldwork-based qualitative work on one or a few cases often encounter doubts about the rigor of their research. They experience pressure to add more cases, including superficial shadow cases, or to combine their qualitative work with statistical or experimental methods. This chapter, along with the other contributions to this volume, ought to inspire intellectual confidence in immersive, interpretive approaches to social scientific inquiry. Contrary to the conventional wisdom, single cases are not prone to verification, merely anecdotal, purely descriptive, or a first step toward a more generalizable analysis. They do not have an “n” of 1. The many scales of social life call into question their status as a single unit. If anything, the experience of fieldwork and subsequent data analysis is one of being overwhelmed by the sheer quantity of observations and the richness and texture of social life. It is the experience of having one’s hypotheses or theories constantly questioned and challenged in real time by situated actors. It is the experience of the “aha!” moment of conceptual innovation in the thick of empirical inquiry, and of our prior categories cast into doubt in the ethnographic or archival encounter with the world in all its breathless

complexity. Ultimately, the iterative, reflexive process of collecting and analyzing data, of moving back and forth between our field sites and our epistemic communities, does not undermine the more general import of our studies. It bolsters it, strengthening both empirical acumen and analytic leverage by honing our concepts and subjecting them to the constant tests provided by events, interviews, and archives.

In this chapter, I have presented two ways to conceive the constitutive multiplicity of the so-called single-case study: casing and siting. Casing shows that a single case can be many cases simultaneously; siting shows that specific places can distill phenomena that are world-historic in scope and scale but impossible to apprehend all at once in their immense totality. Both analytic operations underscore the rigor of qualitative, site-intensive research. Far from shying away from producing insights about broader structures and processes, the contribution of such studies is precisely how they articulate the complex relationship between the particular and the general.

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123

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125

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