

# Problems of, and Prospects for, Comparing the Two Irelands

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## Introduction

THE OBSTACLES TO COMPARING THE TWO IRELANDS ARE FORMIDABLE. Certainly few North to South comparisons have been undertaken in any of the social sciences. Obstacles to such comparisons assume two main forms. The first form of obstacle includes the standard bundle of theoretical and methodological problems that beset any comparative project. However, problems of theory and method are compounded when the countries to be compared are drawn from the ranks of small, 'open' political units and when, as in Ireland, there is no established tradition of undertaking comparative research on which to build. Assertions and assumptions abound in Irish social science about Ireland's place in the world, but comparative research efforts are few in number and often informal in application. The unequal political statuses of the North and South are also troubling. That a state is being compared to a statelet or a semi-state are ways of expressing the difference.

The second form of obstacle lies within the perspectives of the scholars making the comparison rather than the task per se: they fall within the social psychology of comparative analysis. Briefly stated, the intellectual and world views of scholars from neither the North nor the South encourage the development and application of a comparative perspective embracing both Irelands. Few direct comparisons of the North and South have been undertaken. Scholars in the South do not regard the North as a useful or appropriate point of comparison. And scholars in the North do not regard the South as a fruitful point of comparison. Social psychological obstacles to North/South comparisons are to some degree independent of the theoretical and methodological problems associated with

comparative analysis. They need to be understood, however, in the context of the structure of the social sciences in Northern Ireland and in the Republic.

This paper initially examines the problems of, and prospects for, comparing the two Irelands in the following way. The next section reviews the role of comparative thinking and research in Irish social science, establishing the context within which North to South comparisons are conducted. Then, the theoretical and methodological problems associated with undertaking a macro-level comparison between the Republic and the North are addressed. Those problems do not justify the indifference with which scholars North and South have treated the case on the other side of the border. This leads to consideration of the social psychological dimension to comparing the two Irelands. The ultimate objective of this paper is reached in its final section, which looks at the prospects for using comparisons between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland to better understand contemporary Ireland, North and South.

## **The Comparative Tradition in Irish Social Science**

A somewhat stylised account of the introduction and development of comparative work in Irish social science might go like this.<sup>1</sup> Comparative inquiry can often be traced to foreign scholars who located in Ireland in order to conduct field work or to find employment during the 1960s and 1970s. For many, a primary motivation was to obtain data that would add the Irish 'case' to an existing area of comparative inquiry. Scholars interested in aspects of 'modernisation' tended to gravitate to the South; those interested in ethnic conflict and the fate of 'settler societies' went northward. Broader outside interest in Northern Ireland as a comparative case was inhibited by its presumed uniqueness and the predominance of sectarian conflict in the province's life and social institutions. Social inquiries in Northern Ireland, whether qualitative or quantitative, focused on comparisons between Protestants and Catholics.

This legacy remained of some consequence as Irish social science itself became more self-confident and more reliant on systematic data during the 1970s. A large number of aspiring social scientists followed a path from Irish universities and research institutions to specific post-graduate programmes in North America and Britain and then back to employment

<sup>1</sup> My characterisation neglects nuance in pursuit of general tendencies and relates primarily to sociology, social psychology and political science, but also applies to the lack of North to South comparisons in economics. My particular focus is on sociology, my own field and the social science most concerned with establishing generalisations.

in Ireland. They returned with the theoretical perspectives and research methodologies then dominant in their place of study, along with their Ph.D.s. This cohort of new scholars created a strong potential for comparative thinking and research in Irish social science. That potential was realised in ways that varied by discipline and whether the returnee was based in the South or the North. There were also differences among the various university departments and, more generically, between academic and research institutions.

There are both intellectual and structural aspects to the differential use made of comparative thinking and research in Irish social science. In terms of intellectual aspects, a basic consideration is the status that is given to imported theories when seeking an understanding of contemporary Ireland. Here, I would identify two orientations. One orientation stresses a critical application of general theories to the Irish case. General theories guide the research and analysis, and place Ireland in context; the research findings are used to illuminate and refine the same general theories. In short, Ireland is used as a critical case to establish the adequacies of competing explanatory theories. This orientation is broadly characteristic of political science in Ireland, notably in the way that theoretical perspectives have been used to better understand and explain Irish nationalism, and the phenomenon of Irish nationalism then used to further develop those international perspectives.<sup>2</sup>

A second orientation makes a far less critical application of general theories. In this usage, theories are presumed to provide concrete representations of macrosocial units and can thus be used to 'read off' the details of and explanations for the Irish case, treating Ireland as a point in a continuum established from such frameworks as modernisation theory or Structural Marxism. Applicability is viewed as unproblematic. Ireland is not treated as a strategic case to test or improve a general theory.<sup>3</sup> Such an orientation is inimical to meaningful comparative analysis.

<sup>2</sup> Good examples of this orientation include the work by various Irish scholars on nationalism (for example, Coakely, 1980; 1990; Garvin, 1987) and on the social bases of party affiliation and voting behaviour (Laver, 1992 and Mair, 1992 contribute thorough reviews of the large Irish literature on the topic). Within sociology, a critical, reflexive use of prominent theories is evident in studies of the relationship of industrialism to social mobility (Breen and Whelan, 1994; 1995; 1996), the national distinctiveness of socio-religious values (Kelley and de Graaf, 1997); education (Raftery and Hout, 1993), and rural sociology (Hannan, 1979; Hannan and Cummins, 1992). Examples of critical applications of general theories to Ireland are scattered through work in other subfields, for example, criminology (Rottman, 1980; McCullagh, 1996) and the role of the state (Breen *et al.*, 1990; O'Connell and Rottman, 1992).

<sup>3</sup> Applications to Ireland of Structural Marxism, the World System perspective, and dependency theory provide the most dramatic examples of this orientation, but the more subtle assumptions implicit in modernisation theory can also be damaging.

Problems of explanation concerning Northern Ireland are both more and less likely than those concerning the Republic to be framed comparatively. There is a body of work which seeks to explain political instability and ethnic conflict in the North comparatively (e.g., Wright, 1987; Guleke, 1988).<sup>4</sup> However, such studies are exceptions. Most social science exercises in explanations treat Northern Ireland in isolation (McGarry and O'Leary, 1995: 311–12). The tendency to treat Northern Ireland as *sui generis*, lacking in obvious points of comparison, carries over to work focused on institutions and processes, not on conflict.

In the Republic, comparative work in sociology and in some aspects of political science became concentrated in Irish research institutions. This situation in part reflects traditional patterns in which international scholars became affiliated with specific such institutions, which tended to be more hospitable to outsiders, more quantitatively oriented (and, in particular, more open to survey methods) and more active in international networks than were university departments.<sup>5</sup> Institutes also had the financial and organisational wherewithal to carry out large-scale survey research. As a result, the influence of comparative thinking and data ran narrowly through Irish sociology, being marginal to the manner in which some university departments defined their role.

The social sciences in the North and South developed differently in ways that had implications for the growth and shape of comparative thinking and research. Generally, the various social science fields matured earlier in the South, especially in terms of a social science of Irish society (O'Dowd, 1995). This reflects both the foundation provided by visiting anthropologists, sociologists and political scientists in the South, and the cohorts of young scholars returning to Ireland with degrees from the elite British and North American universities. Also, the application of social science theories and perspectives to Ireland was unproblematic to many social scientists in the North, but viewed as problematic in many of the subfields of sociology, political science and economics as pursued in the Republic.

These differences in part reflect the demographics of the social science communities in the two parts of Ireland. The inflow of non-Irish social scientists was far greater in Northern Ireland than in the Republic. Currently, about one-half of the academic staffs of Northern universities

<sup>4</sup> McGarry and O'Leary (1995: Chapter 8) offer the most comprehensive review and appraisal of the theories that have been applied comparatively and the cases that have been selected for comparison.

<sup>5</sup> This is far less applicable to academic Irish political science, which during the 1960s and 1970s became linked to a number of international centres of comparative politics (notably Strathclyde in Scotland and Leiden in the Netherlands).

are from outside of Ireland, primarily from Britain (McVeigh, 1995: 112).<sup>6</sup> The smaller inflow into the Republic was motivated in large measure by interest in Ireland and the strategic case that it represents. However, most non-Irish social scientists in the North seek positions in the North to pursue specialised fields of inquiry through participation in British professional associations and networks. The Sociological Association of Ireland, for example, never developed a broad representation of Northern-based social scientists. Within Northern Ireland, university academic departments are fractured according to place of origin and politics, a demarcation that often divides those who have a primary interest in describing and explaining Irish phenomena from those with more general pursuits. In the less fractured academic departments of the South (at least according to politics and place of origin), consideration of Northern Ireland raises sensitivities that do not encourage pursuit of comparative questions. In other words, 'The North' is thought of as a problem of politics and morality, not one of social science.<sup>7</sup>

By the 1990s, Ireland had shifted from being the passive subject of comparative research to active involvement in its development internationally, particularly in political science and economics, but also within some subfields of sociology such as stratification.<sup>8</sup> Ireland is recognised as a strategic, even critical, test case for theories and Irish scholars contribute to the international development of their areas of expertise.<sup>9</sup> International data collection efforts have yielded a significant, if not overwhelming, body of comparable survey data on Northern Ireland and the Republic. Funding and sponsorship for North to South comparisons, previously lacking, received a boost from the New Ireland Forum, particularly in the Republic.

<sup>6</sup> In 1985, 7 of the 23 sociologists in Southern universities and 15 of the 22 in Northern universities were from outside of Ireland (Lee, 1989: 626).

<sup>7</sup> In the view of a Southern-born social scientist on the faculty of a Northern university, 'To many intellectuals—conservative, liberal and socialist—Northern Ireland was simply a backward province of Britain . . . the Northern Ireland problem was posed as a series of choices: archaic religious passions versus secular humanism, terrorism versus the rule of law, benighted nationalism versus pluralism' (O'Dowd, 1990: 37–8).

<sup>8</sup> Yet the National Economic and Social Council commissioned a Norwegian (Lars Mjøset) to undertake the first methodologically sound international perspective on Irish socio-economic and institutional development.

<sup>9</sup> Pyle's (1990) study of sex discrimination in the Republic is an example. Studies derived from data collected through panel surveys at the Economic and Social Research Institute in Dublin also adopted a comparative stance on topics such as poverty (e.g., Nolan and Callan, 1993; Nolan and Whelan, 1996).

## *Social Stratification*

The study of social stratification in Ireland began with anthropological work, predominately describing rural communities that could serve as deviant, and strategic, cases for structural functionalist theory (but with a notable urban exception—Humphreys' [1966] study of Dubliners). Sociological investigation of the dynamics of social class as a feature of an emerging industrial society was substantially advanced by the work of the English sociologist Bertram Hutchinson, who joined the staff of the Economic and Social Research Institute in the mid-1960s. His two surveys of social mobility in Dublin (in 1968 and 1972), which replicated research he had previously undertaken in Brazil, reflected Hutchinson's primary concern with the impact of modernisation on structured social inequality. Hutchinson's legacy (Hutchinson, 1969; 1973) included a tradition of stratification analysis linked to the prevailing international standards of theory and methods (Glass, 1954). It also embraced data sets that subsequently provided the basis for the first genuine class analysis in the Republic (Whelan and Whelan, 1984) and the first comparative mobility studies involving the Republic (Breen and Whelan, 1985, comparing a Dublin sample to data from England and Wales).

Stratification research in Northern Ireland originated in efforts to understand the relative strength of religion and class as bases for stratification, with particular reference to the weakness of working-class organisations (e.g., the studies reported in Cormack and Osborne, 1983; 1991).<sup>10</sup> The first major stratification inquiry, undertaken by a North American sociologist, was a part of a comparison of conflict relations in Northern Ireland and New Brunswick, Canada (Augner, 1975). A specially drawn sample from the 1971 Census was used to compare the occupational composition of Protestant and Catholic males.

Both Northern Ireland and the Republic were included in comparative discussions on social mobility carried out through international networks associated with the International Sociological Association's Research Section on Mobility. An all-Ireland social mobility study was undertaken by John Jackson, then at The Queen's University, Belfast through funding by the UK Social Science Research Council. Although Jackson's survey produced detailed data for large samples from the North and South, the comparative potential went unexploited for some time, although basic work on Northern Ireland mobility patterns resulted (Miller, 1986).

<sup>10</sup> In this line of inquiry, the work of social anthropologists is often crucial (Harris, 1972). In Northern Ireland, but not in the Republic, a tradition of urban anthropology developed often, but not exclusively, at comprehending the religious divide.

Subsequently, secondary analysis of Hutchinson's data (Breen and Whelan, 1985) and Jackson's data by an American sociologist (Hout and Jackson, 1986; Hout, 1989) explicitly took an all-island comparative purpose, and gave international prominence to consideration of Irish mobility patterns.

The widespread social mobility surveys of the 1970s transformed contemporary study of social class and class mobility (exemplified, notably, in the work of Erikson and Goldthorpe, 1992). In that context, Ireland, and particularly the Republic, offered a crucial test case for the relationship between industrialisation and social mobility, one in which 'history must carry at least as great a weight as theory' (Goldthorpe, 1992: 414).<sup>11</sup>

Social class, social mobility and their links to state strategies and policies, became the central concern of sociological work undertaken at the ESRI in the South, largely through secondary analysis of national surveys. There was also a strong emphasis on the link between social classes and the state in major analyses of society and societal conflict in Northern Ireland (e.g., Bew *et al.*, 1995). The empirical base of such studies, however, was limited to Irish surveys and official statistics, and the comparative dimension remained implicit.<sup>12</sup>

### *Values and Attitudes*

The study of Irish values and attitudes also began as a search for Irish survey data that could speak to the generalisability of international findings on the structure and correlates of values and attitudes. The context was the work of Almond and Verba (1965) that pushed comparative political science beyond its preoccupation with institutions to embrace a new agenda of comparative civic (or political) culture. Scholars around the world quickly sought to add new national cases to the five considered by Almond and Verba.

Indeed, political culture became the topic of the first Irish attitudinal survey with a comparative context. Raven and Whelan (1976: 18) sought to 'study the way in which people perceive the institutions concerned with the

<sup>11</sup> 'Ireland offers an outstanding opportunity for testing empirically certain claims, central to the theory [the liberal theory of industrial society], that concern the effects of industrial development on processes of social stratification, and on the nature and extent of social inequality' (Goldthorpe, 1992: 419). Strategic advantages of the Irish case include the extent of documentation that is available, the role of liberal theory ideas and institutions (World Bank, OECD, IMF) in fostering Irish industrialisation, and, crucially, sequencing in which modernisation preceded industrialisation.

<sup>12</sup> Outsiders are perhaps more conscious of the potential for the Irish case to be illuminated by, and contribute to, the development of general theories concerning state-building (Weitzer, 1990; Lustick, 1993).

management of their society and their own role in relation to them'. The principle researcher, John Raven, was a British social psychologist on the staff of the ESRI concerned with understanding the development of different types of societies through comparative study. Raven had been conducting pilot studies to establish Irish-specific attitudinal measures and scales for a broad-based social survey, but needed to combine resources with Stein Larsen, a Professor at the Institute of Sociology at the University of Bergen, to get a survey into the field. The agreed upon topic was Irish civic culture, replicating Almond and Verba's perspective while also incorporating questions pertaining to specific Irish concerns.<sup>13</sup>

Public opinion poll data provided the underpinnings for many academic analyses of sectarian conflict in Northern Ireland, augmented by three substantial social surveys designed by academics (the classic study by Rose, 1971, and surveys by Moxon-Browne, 1983 and Smith, 1987). After the imposition of Direct Rule, some, but not all (e.g., the General Household Survey) of the official British government social surveys were gradually extended to cover random samples of the Northern population. An independent institute, Social and Community Planning Research, also used a sufficiently large sample from Northern Ireland to support separate analysis, leading to an annual *Social Attitudes in Northern Ireland* report.

The capabilities of survey research were used directly to understand attitudes relating to the Northern conflict. Coordinated surveys were conducted in Northern Ireland (Moxon-Brown, 1983) and in the South (Davis and Sinnott, 1979) under the auspices of the Committee for Social Science Research in Ireland, which itself began as a vehicle for administering a Ford Foundation grant designed to develop the social sciences in Ireland. Controversy surrounding the interpretation of the survey data from the Republic may have blunted the attractiveness of North to South comparisons (Davis *et al.*, 1980), but the feasibility of such research was amply demonstrated.

The prestige of social surveys in the South was enhanced by Ireland's inclusion in the ten-nation 1981 European Values Study Group survey, which sought to examine 'the moral and social values systems prevailing in Europe'. Results from the Irish survey provided the basis for extensive public discussion of major contemporary political and social issues, including those relating to Northern Ireland, which also participated in the survey (Fogarty *et al.*, 1984). In particular, the survey findings were interpreted to show that the values of the people of the two Irelands were closer

<sup>13</sup> The standing of attitudinal research in the South was enhanced by another replication (MacGréil, 1977; 1991), which examined 'prejudice and tolerance' among Dubliners using the constructs and survey items developed in the United States for the study of race relations.

to one another than to the rest of the British Isles or Continental Europe. Questions from the 1981 survey were repeated in a 1990 survey, again conducted in both the North and South. The results of the international survey have been widely analysed, and the two Irish cases treated as crucial to interpreting the direction and structure of national value systems (e.g., Kelley and De Graaf, 1997). Irish scholars have examined the link between social change and Irish values in the Republic to challenge the very concept of Irish conservatism and uniqueness that makes it so attractive a case for outsiders and to relevant general theories (Whelan, 1994).

### **Generic and Specific Problems of Theory and Method**

Both Irelands also have been compared to a wide, even exotic range of countries.<sup>14</sup> But most such comparisons are informal, and many are ad hoc. Very few include both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. The more rigorous comparisons—of class voting and of social mobility, for example—stand for limiting consideration to other industrial capitalist societies and often include both the North and the South as cases. Here, Ireland is often treated strategically, using general theory to inform analysis of Irish structures and processes and using the results to refine theory itself.

To better understand the reasons for this limited and specialised use of the comparative method, I address five questions with specific reference to Ireland and Irish social science. How to compare? How to select the appropriate cases for a comparison? Which cases are truly independent of one another? How to overcome the limitations of small numbers of cases to work with (the small-N problem). And, finally, what kinds of theories should guide comparisons?<sup>15</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Ruane and Todd (1996: 4) note that ‘Northern Ireland has been compared, *inter alia*, with Canada, South Tyrol, Algeria, the southern US, Bohemia, Prussian Poland, ex-Yugoslavia, the Armenian-Azerbaijan frontier, and implicitly with societies such as Fiji and Burundi’. This reflects the focus on ethno-religious conflict and political instability. While the Republic has been compared to Latin America (Kirby, 1992) and rapidly industrialising Southeast Asia, most comparisons are to the OECD member states in Europe, North America and the Antipodes.

<sup>15</sup> Goldthorpe (1997) highlights the ‘black box’ problem of processes and connections that lie between the causes and effects that we can observe. I chose, however, to stress problems of selecting cases, which I believe are pervasive in comparisons undertaken by Irish social scientists.

## How to Compare?

Selecting a method for comparison is often presented as a choice between two broad approaches to knowing: the quantitative (variable-oriented) and the qualitative (or case-oriented).<sup>16</sup> The variable-oriented, quantitative approach operates through a probabilistic logic and is usually directed at achieving explanation and generalisation in the context of a general theory: it tests abstract hypotheses drawn from general theories (Bollen, 1993: 335). Erikson and Goldthorpe's (1992) analysis of the relationship between class origins and class destinations, measured at the individual level, as it varies among ten industrialised nations adheres to this basic logic, although they lack sufficient cases for a full operationalisation.<sup>17</sup>

The case-oriented, qualitative approach seeks to be holistic, is fundamentally deterministic in its approach to causation (if that is the objective), and stresses what is historical and unique. The aspiration is to treat nations as meaningful wholes. Weitzer's (1990) comparison of Zimbabwe to Northern Ireland as settler societies or Hechter's (1975) study of internal colonialism within the British Isles exemplify this approach. The qualitative approach can be adapted to consider a large (by the standards of macrosocial comparison) number of cases and be multivariate and to reflect a conjunctural form of causal reasoning (Ragin, 1987).<sup>18</sup> Proponents of qualitative studies notably Tilly (1984) and Ragin (1987) claim to occupy a privileged position in their ability to overcome the problems associated with comparative analysis. Their position seems doubtful, however; 'the logic of good quantitative and good qualitative research designs do not fundamentally differ'—they share the same logic of inference despite their different styles (King *et al.*, 1994: 4; see also Goldthorpe, 1997).<sup>19</sup>

Most comparisons are quantitative (based on Ragin's criteria): in recent

<sup>16</sup> Comparisons can also be used to illustrate, to establish the limits of existing theory, and to generate hypotheses, all uses that stop short of pursuing causal explanations (Satori, 1993; Skocpol and Somers, 1980) or as a method for achieving control (Smelser, 1976).

<sup>17</sup> Separate analyses in the volume examine social fluidity in Australia, Japan and the United States, countries that are often regarded as exceptions to the general pattern.

<sup>18</sup> Specifically, Ragin offers a 'qualitative comparative method' based on Boolean algebra that seeks to merge features of both the qualitative and quantitative approaches, but adheres to the basic logic of case-oriented comparisons.

<sup>19</sup> Qualitative studies incorporate causal reasoning through J. S. Mill's method of agreement (appropriate where the cases have the same value on the dependent variable) and his method of difference (appropriate where the cases differ on the dependent variable). The surface appeal of such explanatory reasoning is misleading (see the critiques by, among others, Goldthorpe, 1991; 1994; 1997; Lieberman, 1992) 'Application of Mill's methods to small-N situations does not allow for probabilistic theories, interaction effects, measurement errors, or even the presence of more than one cause' (Lieberman, 1992: 117).

Anglo-American sociology only 5 per cent of articles and 21 per cent of books are qualitative (Bollen *et al.*, 1993: 339). However, Ireland North and South have more frequently been considered through qualitative comparisons. Would-be comparativists treating Ireland, and perhaps especially Northern Ireland, as a holistic case face some difficulties. The difficulty in identifying the most appropriate basis for comparison is exacerbated by Ireland's distinctiveness as a part of Europe's North Atlantic periphery. Ireland also is exposed 'to two quite different force-fields—one "European" (which makes it similar in some respects to Scotland, Wales, Brittany or Galicia), the other "colonial" (giving it some of the characteristics of the settler societies of the New World)' (Ruane and Todd, 1996: 269).<sup>20</sup>

### **Are the Cases 'Independent'?**

Ireland presents a particular application of what is known as Galton's Problem, which challenges the presumed independence of cases in comparative analyses.<sup>21</sup> The shared cultural patterns or policy choices of nation-states observed in comparative research may reflect processes of diffusion, from one to the other or from a third case to both, rather than the workings of general causal processes operative within societies. The influence of international institutions such as the World Bank or European Union makes the true independence of national cases questionable, as do the demands imposed by a global economy on the small open economies of many nations and regions.

Such concerns have a clear applicability to Ireland. The Republic and Northern Ireland share a significant administrative inheritance, both of institutions and of political traditions. Both were strongly influenced by changes in British public policy after 1922 and constrained by a shared marginal location within the global economic system. Certainly the same set of international institutions associated with economic development left their marks on the political and economic institutions of both North and South. Across a broad spectrum of comparisons related to public institutions and public policy choices and outcomes, the two Irelands might not

<sup>20</sup> Ruane and Todd (1996: 4–5) relate this ambiguity of 'context' to three problems of the comparative method that lead them to proceed cautiously with comparisons: the cultural base of 'meaning'; multideterminism through the interaction of several variables, and the duality of 'contexts' as simultaneously 'internal' and 'external'. However, a sophisticated methodological literature responds to such concerns (see, especially, King *et al.*, 1994).

<sup>21</sup> So named in recognition of Sir Francis Galton's critique of a paper examining the laws of marriage and descent delivered in 1889 to the Royal Anthropological Institute in London (Elder, 1976: 217). Even today, however, few macrocomparisons are attentive to the problem.

be truly independent cases. This concern has particular relevance to the Republic's inclusion in comparative studies seeking to explain the size, scope and nature of welfare states (O'Connor and Brym, 1988; O'Connell, 1994).

There is a body of thought, notably Irish adherents to dependency theory or the world-system perspective, that underestimates the value of treating the South, and for a different set of reasons, the North, as true explanatory units—as cases for comparative analysis. Existing applications of the world-system perspective to Ireland, however sophisticated, tend to be framed as absolutes. The approach taken is too deterministic, reading off a set of characteristics from Ireland's place in the world system. In terms of the North, although there are strong precedents for giving regions within nation-states an independent status, it seems preferable to treat the North in terms of its specific political status.

The most fundamental question is the continuing explanatory relevance of structures and processes within Ireland, relative to the dictates of the global economic and political order. Globalisation is a set of processes that are turning the world into 'a single place' (Robertson, 1992: 396). The term also denotes the current phase of capitalism. 'An integrated and co-ordinated global division of labour' replaced monopoly capitalism, in which 'the world economy could be understood as an aggregation of reasonably distinct national economies; production . . . organised within national boundaries' (Gereffi, 1994: 208). Neither national economies nor state policies may retain sufficient autonomy to be of prime interest in comparative analyses. Consequently, Irish stratification processes, for example, may be shaped more by the international than the national division of labour.

Treating the Republic and the North as explanatory units does require that their institutions and policy-making apparatuses have the capability to shape the national characteristics of interest. Participation in the global economy limits the choices available in formulating national or regional policy. Certainly the Republic's dependence on investments by multinational firms and the North's dependence on subsidies from the British Exchequer make their economies vulnerable to outside influences (Kennedy, 1989). But the strength of such influences is overstated in world-system-based explanations of Ireland's pattern of developments. Or, more precisely, the countervailing national factors are systematically undervalued.

Another important consequence of the application of world-system and similar perspectives to Ireland is that its slot in the world system is seen as translating automatically into a weak state (O'Hearn, 1995). A more compelling case can be made, however, that a form of a state-centred

theory is essential for comprehending developments in Southern Ireland since Independence (Rottman *et al.*, 1982; Girvin, 1989; Breen *et al.*, 1990; and O'Connell and Rottman, 1992). Similarly, the work of Bew and his colleagues (1995) on the Northern state would seem to suggest that it retained considerable explanatory force through its various manifestations.<sup>22</sup>

In comparative research, 'boundaries around place and time periods define cases' (Ragin, 1987: 5). The island of Ireland is an awkward place to fix such boundaries of time and place. Political and economic boundaries have coincided rarely in the modern period. A clear split in the economies of the North and the South was evident in the middle of the nineteenth century (Bradley, 1996: 147). State-building North and South came later for the most part, but preceded partition. Changes in the British Administration between 1880 and 1920 forged two civil services, one in Dublin and the other in Belfast, that were easily grafted onto the two new states (McCogan, 1982; McBride, 1991).<sup>23</sup>

### What can be done with Small-Ns?

Can meaningful comparisons be made between two cases (North and South) or among the small number of countries that are likely to be relevant to both North and South? This, the small-N problem, is pervasive: most comparative studies in the areas of stratification and of race and ethnic relations are based on five or fewer cases and a significant proportion embrace only two cases (Bollen *et al.*, 1993: 228). Some of the most influential comparative works of the post-Second World War period are based on small numbers of cases (Skocpol, 1979; Moore, 1966). The problems encountered with small-Ns, however, apply equally to these qualitative studies. Variables must exceed cases by a ratio that can be established empirically (King *et al.*, 1994: 213–17). Thus, ultimately, the small-N problem is one of too little data, not of the choice of method (Goldthorpe, 1997).

<sup>22</sup> There may be, however, unexploited possibilities in terms of how a perspective derived from dependency theory can breathe some new life into old subjects. McCullagh (1996: Chapter 5), for example, draws upon some ideas from dependency theory to explain crime patterns in the Republic. Explanation there, however, requires a version of dependency perspective so 'soft' as to be heretical.

<sup>23</sup> The independence of the North and South as 'cases' can also be viewed as under threat from the growth of supranational forms of government such as the European Union. However, the EU's member states retain a largely unrestricted role in key policy areas such as education, industrial relations, social welfare and taxation—which collectively filter world-system effects on national populations (Castles, 1988).

Comparisons embracing the North and South can either be one-on-one or include other cases that are relevant and appropriate to the purpose of the comparison. Either option raises the small-N problem: there are too many variables and too few cases.<sup>24</sup> Consideration of a small number of cases, the typical situation for comparisons involving Ireland, has other consequences. Reliance on a small number of cases highlights the specifics from the history and circumstances of the countries considered (Tilly, 1984: 76). Small-N comparisons bring out dissimilarities, in contrast to larger comparisons, which tend to reveal similarities. And findings of dissimilarity present more difficult problems of interpretation than do those indicating similarity. The explanation of differences between nations ‘requires more explicit consideration of historical, cultural, and political-economic particularities than does the lawful explanation of cross-national similarities’ (Kohn, 1987: 717).

In small-N situations, the tension between general causal arguments and the historically contingent is likely to be strong. Indeed, history is often central to comparative work on Ireland. How does one incorporate the distinctive history of the island and of the North and South in this century into comparisons? To some, comparisons must be framed to incorporate the specifics of history. This makes it difficult for theory to guide comparative projects. Others, notably Goldthorpe (1997) argue that ‘history exposes the limits of theory’, a view he has related to the potential for the Irish case to sharpen understanding of the relationship between industrialisation and the openness of class structures (Goldthorpe, 1992).

### **How to Select Comparable Cases?**

The selection of cases is the main choice available to a qualitative comparativist (King *et al.*, 1994: Chapter 4; Sartori, 1994). It is also fundamental to the task of quantitative comparativists. For both types of comparisons, the objective is to select the cases that maximise leverage over the causal hypotheses under consideration and to eliminate confounding variables. The most common approach is to select cases that are as similar as possible (Bollen *et al.*, 1993: 331). The other common strategy, the selection of cases that are as different as possible, is rarely applied to Ireland.

Case selection is related to the fundamental question of whether Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland can validly be selected for inclusion in a comparison. Do the discrepant political statuses of the two

<sup>24</sup> Stated differently, a problem arises when ‘we have more inferences than implications observed’ (King *et al.*, 1994: 119), a problem as applicable to qualitative comparisons as it is to quantitative ones.

Irelands—the North as a region of the UK and the Republic as a nation-state, make a true macrocomparison possible?<sup>25</sup>

Macrocomparative social science uses the attributes of macrosocial units to offer explanations (Ragin, 1987: 5–7). The ‘unit of explanation’ (what accounts for the observed results), must be societal or otherwise macrosocial; the ‘unit of observation’ (the one used for data collection and data analysis) is the individual.<sup>26</sup> Typically, the macrosocial explanatory unit is the nation-state, although units within nations, including regions, can meet these criteria (Elder, 1976: 218–19).<sup>27</sup>

There are a number of approaches to resolving the problem of when the North and South can be compared, either to one another or in a broader comparison. The first two strategies seek to meet Ragin’s (1987) assumption that the nation-state or other macrosocial entity serves as the explanatory unit. A third approach meets Kohn’s (1987: 714) lower standard for cross-national research: studies that are explicitly comparative in that they ‘utilize systematically data from two or more nations’. A fourth strategy treats the Irish case to test (‘confirm or infirm’) a theory or perspective (Kazancigil, 1994). The fifth strategy is a ‘side by side’ comparison in which findings from one case are used informally to illuminate findings from the other case.

### *Nation-State to State or Nation*

Definitions of a nation-state abound, with several alternatives that are particularly relevant to the task in hand. Charles Tilly in his sweeping interpretations of European history, prefers the general label of national state: ‘states governing multiple contiguous regions and their cities by

<sup>25</sup> Indeed, one Southern sociologist whose views I respect greatly described a North/South comparison to me as being tantamount to comparing North Dakota to Canada. But there are precedents for such a study. The study of the status attainment process, which dominated the field of stratification during the 1970s and beyond, was based on a survey of young men in the state of Wisconsin. A small industry emerged in which national samples from other countries were, in essence, being compared to natives of Wisconsin.

<sup>26</sup> Ragin (1987: 5) offers as an example the link between social class and political party preference: ‘If a study seeks to explore the link between various configurations of industrial society and that link, it is comparative. However, if the objective is to use data from various countries to test a hypothesis stating that people follow their economic interest when voting, the social scientist would have avoided concretizing any macrosocial unit and thereby would have avoided engaging in comparative social science.’

<sup>27</sup> Przeworski and Teune (1970) offer a more restrictive definition of comparative social science because they exclude instances in which the dependent variable is an aggregation of individual level data (e.g., national literacy rates or unemployment rates). Dependent variables in their programme describe relationships that are measured at the level of the individual.

means of centralized, differentiated, and autonomous structures'. Such entities are rare, but even rarer are those that he terms nation-states:

. . . a state whose people share a strong linguistic, religious, and symbolic identity. Although states such as Sweden and Ireland now approximate that ideal, very few European national states have ever qualified as nation-states.<sup>28</sup> (1993: 2–3)

The nature of the Irish state has generated much debate in the South. Unfortunately, much of the discussion has revolved around issues of 'autonomy' and 'capacity' without producing a clear outcome. Proponents of a strong, autonomous state may have been over eager to apply the then popular state-centred approach to Ireland. However, such an approach does seem to provide an explanation of such key features of the Republic as the growth and shape of its welfare state (O'Connell and Rottman, 1992).

It may be that centralisation, rather than 'autonomy' is the real consideration about the two Irelands when framing a comparative project. The UK and the Republic of Ireland are among the more centralised of the EU countries. Centralisation complicates a direct comparison because so many aspects of government in the North are established in London and not in Belfast. Such a conclusion, though, emphasises the 'state' component of the nation-state.

There nevertheless are strong precedents for including both North and South in a comparative project. Erikson and Goldthorpe (1992: 53), for example, treat Northern Ireland, Scotland, England and Wales, and the Republic of Ireland as independent *national* units in their study of comparative social mobility. The first three of those units are treated as 'the component parts of a larger, multinational state'. Sufficient variation in social fluidity is found among those component parts to make a strong claim for their separate consideration. While Northern Ireland is one of eleven official regions of the United Kingdom, its institutional distinctiveness suffices to justify its treatment as a case in some comparative projects.

### *Nation-State to Region-State*

Regions of countries can stand alone as the units for macrosocial comparison if justified by the specific topic that is the reason for the comparison (Elder, 1976: 218–19). The concept of a 'region-state' offers one possible basis for framing North to South comparisons. A 'region-state' is a:

<sup>28</sup> Chase-Dunn (1989) and Giddens (1985) offer alternative definitions with different implications for the conduct of comparative analysis.

. . . natural economic zone that has important advantages for successfully competing in the global economy: 'The primary linkages of region states tend to be with the global economy and not with their host nations. . . . A region-state must be small enough for its citizens to share certain economic and consumer interests but of adequate size to justify the infrastructure . . . necessary to participate economically on a global scale'. (Ohmae, 1993: 80)

Region-states are thus focused on the global economy, while nation-states are focused on domestic politics. Ohmae (1993: 81) asserts that a region-state is defined by economies of scale in consumption, infrastructure and professional services (rather than in production) and, further, that where this obtains, religious, ethnic and racial divisions are unimportant.

A more sociological formulation of a region-state potentially offers a gateway to direct North/South comparisons. To Giddens (1984: 122), region:

. . . always carries the connotation of the structuration of social conduct across time-space. Thus there is a strong degree of regional differentiation, in terms of class relationships and a variety of other social criteria, between the North and the South in Britain. The 'North' is not just a geographically delimited area but one with long-established, distinctive traits.

Applications of the 'new regionalism' to the political sociology of Scotland bear this out by identifying three 'places' (in effect, regions) in which economic base, demography, culture and politics combine (Agnew, 1987: Chapter 7).<sup>29</sup> Discounting the significance of regional differences in the socio-economic institutions within nation-states may promote aggregation error.<sup>30</sup>

A solid sociological definition of a region-state would open up new possibilities for comparisons between small open economies (such as the South) and small open regions, such as the North. Bradley (1996: 4, 32–3, 55) strongly advocates such a stance, while also noting issues for which the different statuses of state apparatuses North and South make direct comparison inappropriate. Such comparisons need not focus on economic issues directly. Regional institutions and culture can provide a sufficient rationale for treating the North and the South as cases meriting the same explanatory status. Comparative studies of public trust and confidence in

<sup>29</sup> The extent to which regional differences within nations are of consequence to structured social inequality may be linked back to processes in the global economy. Region is more important in weak states (that is, economically uncompetitive nations), such as Britain, than in strong states, such as Sweden (Vogler, 1985: 168–72).

<sup>30</sup> A North/South comparison would seem a natural vehicle for addressing Joe Lee's claims concerning entrepreneurship in the South or the various contending claims as to which forces most strongly condition Irish economic performance, a question addressed by Mjøsset (1992) for the South without particular reference to the North (see Bradley, 1996: 34).

government, for example, can treat the North and South as equivalent units of analysis (see the 21 nation study by Nye *et al.*, 1997).<sup>31</sup>

### *Context to Context*

If we specify that the nation (usually nation-state) is the *context* of study rather than its object (which is its role in the Ragin approach), opportunities for comparative research expand greatly. The national context can be formally incorporated into the comparison, as it was in Kelley and De Graaf's (1997) study of religious beliefs that included both national (the context) and parental religiosity as explanatory factors in a 15 country study. However, any study qualifies for this general strategy if it primarily seeks to test the generality of findings and interpretations about how various social institutions operate or how social structures impinge on individuals (Kohn, 1987: 714).<sup>32</sup> Much, perhaps most, of the social science research undertaken in the North or in the South would seem to qualify for this specification of comparative work.

### *Deviant or Strategic Case Analysis*

Selection to achieve diversity is associated with the selection of deviant or strategic cases for analysis. This has been frequently applied in Ireland, for example, in the context of the relationship between industrialisation and class mobility (Breen and Whelan, 1995; this volume).<sup>33</sup> In this scenario the hypotheses drawn from a general theory suggest that Ireland is either a deviant case (it modernised before it industrialised) or is an outlier to the general pattern observed through the analysis of cases (it is the least 'open' of the industrial nations). In a sense, such deviant case analyses explore the boundary between theory and history (Goldthorpe, 1997; Kazancigil, 1993).

<sup>31</sup> Kohn is agnostic about whether the nation-state has a special status in comparative research, noting that 'we learn something about the importance or lack of importance of the nation-state by discovering which processes transcend national boundaries and which processes are idiosyncratic to particular nations or to particular types of nations' (1987: 725).

<sup>32</sup> Kohn (1987: 725) usefully distinguishes comparative, cross-national and cross-cultural research, and notes how they differ from cross-societal and cross-systemic research.

<sup>33</sup> Arensberg and Kimball, and their mentor W. Lloyd Warner, were perhaps the first to seize upon the strategic potential of the Irish case. The sociology department of Harvard University had developed a central hypothesis through the application of the ethnographic methods and theories used to study primitive societies to a New England city ('Yankee City'). Then, 'in a setting far different but still in some ways closely comparable to the American scene . . . they would try to give it [their hypothesis] a greater precision' (1940/68: xxx).

### *Side-by-Side Comparisons*

Here, the nation still serves as the context for the research, but the comparisons are informal and implicit. Comparisons are informal because the researcher does not employ a theory that indicates which characteristics of the macrosocial units are important or why they are important as explanations for the phenomena being studied. There is usually no explicit interest in generalising from the collection of nations under scrutiny. Rather, comparisons are made of industrial relations or crime trends in several countries in the hope that doing so clarifies patterns and sharpens interpretation of findings in each nation or in the primary nation of interest.

Most North/South comparisons take this form. The Republic and Northern Ireland are discussed in successive sections of a chapter or article (Rottman, 1989; Brewer, 1996) or in successive chapters of an edited volume (e.g., O'Hearn, 1995; O'Dowd, 1995). The two 'cases' engage at a distance and discursively rather than analytically.

Side-by-side comparisons are desirable and may be a necessary first step toward comparative analyses fitting the specifications of Kohn or Ragin. Too often, though, the informal and implicit nature of side-by-side comparison promotes interpretations that are based, in effect, on stereotypical views of particular nations and their peoples: their entrepreneurial abilities, their mind sets, or a vague reference to 'their histories'.

### **What Kinds of Theories are Helpful?**

Often, the theories that have been applied to the North or the South, and are thus available for application to North/South comparisons, stifle comparisons. Dependency and world-system perspectives deny either Ireland independent status as explanatory units. Similarly, structural functionalism (for which the Republic was one of the last refuges) and modernisation theory are based on a presumed convergence of nations, due to the logic of industrial society. In all of these theoretical perspectives, what transpires within nations is of limited significance relative to what occurs on a larger stage.

There is a more specific problem. These theoretical frameworks all suffer from inattention to macro-to-micro linkages. All comparative analyses need to be attentive to the often neglected 'micro' foundations of macro-sociology (Erikson and Goldthorpe, 1992: 1; Goldthorpe, 1992: 141–2).<sup>34</sup>

<sup>34</sup> The principle of methodological individualism is that 'all social phenomena are ultimately explicable in terms of the actions of individuals and of their intended and unintended consequences . . . What methodological individualism denies is not the reality of social phenomena but rather that there are supra-individual actors or ("subjects") . . . whose action can or must be understood independently of and prior to, that of individuals in the context of,

Explanations of differences between the North and South premised on the projects or interests of various social classes or of the state are unconvincing in my view. Macro-level explanations for North/South differences need to specify, for example, why *individuals* occupying similar class positions in the North and in the South behave differently as voters or trade union members (Breen and Rottman, 1995). Here, rational choice (or action) theory offers a basis for connecting macrosocial processes and the behaviour of individuals. It is not the only vehicle for making that connection, but it has been applied to topics of clear relevance to a comparison of North and South (Hechter, 1986; Meadwell, 1993).

### **The Nature and Role of Vision**

The theoretical and methodological problems associated with comparative analysis, although formidable, cannot fully account for the paucity of social science work embracing both the North and South of Ireland. Instead, explanations for the reciprocal neglect of the island's other 'case' require reference to what I term the social psychology of comparisons.

A social psychological dimension is generic to comparative analyses, affecting which problems and which cases are regarded as appropriate for such treatment.<sup>35</sup> Lipset (1990; 1996), for example, notes the pattern in North America for United States social scientists to ignore the 'case' to their North, but for nothing to be written by their Canadian counterparts *without* a comparison to the United States. Why this is so is a question to be answered primarily within the sociology of knowledge, not within the logic of the comparative method. In a consideration of problems of comparing Northern Ireland and the Republic, however, social psychological issues are more acute.

The international literature provides little guidance for these problems of vision. Indeed, in some measure however, the problem is specific to 'these islands':

say, some theory of history or the functioning of social systems' (Erikson and Goldthorpe, 1992: 1, fn 1).

<sup>35</sup> Related issues include why some kinds of social science theory are popular in some regions and nations but not in others and why some social structures and processes are viewed as problematic in some places but not in others. Kohn (1987: 713, fn 1) summarises analyses of the varying fortunes of comparative studies in American (US) sociology, and the internationalisation of that discipline since the 1960s, including the rise in cross-national collaborations.

. . . studies of contemporary Irish society, history and politics have tended to suffer from a habit of viewing Irish affairs as unique, in part, a consequence of ‘the usual British Isles parochialism’. (Garvin, 1996: 1)

There are, however, features of the intellectual climate generally, and of Irish social sciences, that differ between North and South, creating different visions of the island’s other case. I treat these separately, beginning with the Republic.

### *Southern Perspectives*

The ‘spirit of an age’ (Lee, 1989: 619) during the formative years of Irish social science inhibited comparative work. Declan Kiberd (1996: 574) sums up the atmosphere of the 1960s and 1970s in this way:

To many southerners, the north seemed a Neanderthal place, caught in a historical time-warp, inhabited by paranoiacs who couldn’t trust one another, much less the outside world. The south liked to think of itself as superior, affluent, urbane and forward-looking; the north, according to such thinking, was trapped in a woeful, repetitive past.

Kiberd (1996: 573–5) places this lack of interest and sense of connection in the context of the coincidence of ‘the Troubles’ with the Republic’s long-delayed emergence into a period of affluence and dynamism. It was also a period in which Catholicism became primarily a private, rather than public identity: ‘In the new emerging Ireland, religion was to be a private affair.’ The result was a weak solidarity with the nationalist community in the North: ‘A plague on both your houses’ was a common response. In Sean O’Faolain’s (1969: 165) words, the population of the South was ‘weary of the past’.<sup>36</sup>

Simply put, the North was not regarded as an appropriate point of reference for Southern social science.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>36</sup> An alternative interpretation is that the Lemass era’s preoccupation with material success reflected a belief that Southern economic development was the most practical and promising expression of nationalism. A modern, prosperous South might be less objectionable to Northern unionists as part of a united Ireland (Brown, 1985: 279–80).

<sup>37</sup> When I joined the staff of the ESRI in September, 1975, the North was very much in the news. It was not frequently discussed in the Institute, being, I think, regarded as a topic for conversation with family and friends, not with colleagues. However, Roy Geary, the formidable first Director of the ESRI, and perhaps the most distinguished social analyst Ireland has produced, worked in collaboration with Northern statisticians and economists. Also, the Professors of Economics at The Queen’s University and the New University of Ulster served on the ESRI’s Council. Northern social scientists published articles in the *Economic and Social Review*. So my sense was and is that the ESRI was atypically engaged with its Northern counterparts.

The Irish contemporary historian finds himself in the unusual position of being simultaneously insider and outsider. He cannot pronounce on both Northern Ireland and the Republic from the same perspective, relying on the same silent assumptions. A truly comparative history of North and South has yet to be adequately conceived, much less completed. Southern Irish historians, like myself, are likely to be as ambivalent toward the North as are citizens of the Republic in general. If it was a striking achievement of an impressive generation of Irish historians to 'exorcise passion' from the study of the Irish past, it did so largely by evading the challenge of contemporary history. (Lee, 1990: *xiv*)

However, there was from the 1980s onwards a growing interest in using cross-national comparisons to enhance understanding of structure and processes in the Republic. Comparative references to other small Western European countries became commonplace in Irish social science. Girvin (1989), for example, used several groups of comparisons in his analysis of development in Ireland. One comparative reference for him is the experience of Greece, Portugal and Spain. He also made use of comparisons to Austria, Finland and Switzerland. Indeed, the title of his book, *Between Two Worlds*, reflects his claim for Irish distinctiveness, with the Republic falling between the situation of high growth and high living standards of countries such as Denmark, Finland and Austria and the situation of low growth and low living standards of such countries as Greece, Brazil and Argentina. Other writers were more taken by the parallels between the Republic and Latin America. An interest in those parallels dates back to Independence, and has been reinforced through the influence of Liberation Theology in more recent years (Kiberd, 1996: 272, 572; Kirby, 1992).<sup>38</sup>

Lee's (1989) *Ireland: Politics and Society* was published in the same year as Girvin's book and also made extensive and imaginative use of comparative material. The extensive publicity and discussion that Lee's book generated solidified the emerging status of comparative work, making it fashionable and almost obligatory. Kiberd (1996: 645–6), for example, argues that an 'insistence on the value of comparisons' was Joe Lee's greatest contribution to Irish scholarship, breaking through a tradition that insisted on Irish exceptionality. However, he notes that Lee's comparisons:

<sup>38</sup> As Smith (1995, 38) notes, 'Too often, the construction of nations has been equated with state-building. But state-building . . . is not to be confused with the forging of a national cultural and political identity among often culturally heterogeneous populations.' This claim, developed in light of the experience in contexts such as the Philippines and Ethiopia applies to Northern Ireland, and argues for a focus on institutions and culture that, even if in contention, are Northern Ireland, not UK phenomena.

. . . were all with smaller European countries, which did not undergo the long nightmare of colonial expropriation and misrule, much less wave after wave after wave of massive emigration. Had he widened his field of vision, he might have conceded that in many respects the Irish achievement has been remarkable.

Kiberd's concern is based largely on the case of Greece, the EU's other European post-colonial nation, which tends to be outside of Lee's comparative scope.

Still, the new popularity of interpretations founded upon comparisons in the South has not extended to broad consideration of the North as a case. There are some exceptions, notably in economics (Bradley, 1996),<sup>39</sup> the sociology of education (Breen, Heath and Whelan, this volume), and social mobility (Breen and Whelan, this volume).

### *Northern Perspectives*

The general failure of Irish social scientists to seek analytical leverage through North/South comparisons does parallel the curious scholarly silence in the North about the sectarian Northern state (O'Leary, 1993). O'Leary offers a concise but devastating history of the Northern state that makes the silence from the academic community so deafening:

Why at no time during those years [before 1969] did the academics of Queen's University of Belfast—the University of Ulster was scarcely off the ground by 1968—provide the guidance that other societies have come to expect from intellectuals? (O'Leary, 1993: 155)<sup>40</sup>

O'Leary's tenure as a professor at The Queen's University, Belfast suggests that he possessed relevant insider and self-knowledge. However, he raises the question at the end of his contribution and leaves it unanswered.<sup>41</sup>

During the 1970s, the social sciences in Northern Ireland became

<sup>39</sup> Some fundamental commonalities between North and South have been noted, such as a shared record as being among the 'striking economic failures of this century' (Lee, 1989: *xiii*).

<sup>40</sup> Hill and Marsh (1993) point to the role played by Basil Chubb in the South as what was absent in the North. However, after 1969, Northern-based social scientists became rapidly engaged in addressing political and social issues. It is fair to say that by the 1990s the degree of engagement with issues of the day in the North rivalled or exceeded that found among social scientists based in the South.

<sup>41</sup> This claim of mutual neglect can be extended to Irish economists: 'In the past each region saw its peripherality *not* in the context of the island of Ireland, encompassing—in an entirely benign way—the similar plight of the other region, but in a more exclusive way that placed little value on the market potential of the other region or of the island economy as a whole' (Bradley, 1996: 32). Bradley goes on to note that the North is understood as one of the eleven UK sub-regions, while the South is viewed as a small peripheral member state of the EU (1996: 33).

vigorous in productivity and in ‘relevance’ (Whyte, 1990). Of course, ‘the Troubles’ can explain much of the change, but other factors are important. Considerations include the presence of a new generation of Irish social scientists, many trained in the United States (or in the South), rather than the UK and previously noted all-Ireland social science research committees and funding.

But this new vigour did not generate a look southward for comparative inspiration. University departments remained fractured, with Britain the main frame of reference for many academics.<sup>42</sup> Many scholars mirrored the Southern view of the Republic’s uniqueness. Here, however, the South’s uniqueness is rooted in the dominance of the Catholic Church, economic failure, debilitating emigration, poor public service provision and dependence upon EU largesse (Ruane and Todd, 1996: 256–9). The South was easy to dismiss by Northern Protestants and Catholics alike as irrelevant to understanding their situations.

### **Prospects for Comparing the Two Irelands**

Comparative research is demanding of time, effort and resources. The task of comparing Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland presents further obstacles. There is a weak tradition of systematic comparisons on which to build: the use of the comparative method has been a weakness, not a strength of Irish social science. Scholars in one part of the island operate through mind sets that render the structures and processes of the other part irrelevant to understanding and explaining. Moreover, the different political statuses of the North and South restrict the kinds of topics, questions and hypotheses that sensibly can be approached comparatively.

Cross-national comparisons also have a unique capacity to illuminate, to test alternative explanations, and to explain. North/South comparisons, either one-on-one or with a set of other purposefully selected cases, have much to offer. Useful comparisons can range from those in which countries (or regions) serve as explanatory units to less ambitious forms of context-to-context or side-by-side studies. It should be recognised, however, that the lower the ambition, the lower will be the contribution.

What needs to be done? Comparisons that treat the Irish case—North, South, or both—strategically to apply and test general theories have delivered dramatic increases in knowledge. The North has served this role in relation to settler societies and the South in relation to the origins and

<sup>42</sup> A Southern-born, United States-trained sociologist returning to an academic post in the North during the mid-1970s claims that ‘I seemed to have become an outsider in what I had hitherto regarded as my own country’ (O’Dowd, 1990: 34).

consequences of structured social inequality. Such comparisons are demanding intellectually but do not presuppose the availability of precisely comparable international data.

A shift from reliance on qualitative comparisons and toward quantitative ones is also needed to realise the contribution to theory and understanding that the comparative method can yield. Scholars in both North and South seem reluctant to exploit the body of data now available from international surveys through secondary analysis. Irish universities need to provide the training required for macrocomparisons and to instill the value of systematic comparative thinking. Some of the problems that I label social psychological are doubtless products of the forms of professional socialisation prevalent in Irish economics, history, social psychology and sociology over recent decades.

This leads directly to the issue of how to select the cases for comparison. A promising development is the concept of 'families of nations, defined in terms of shared geographical, linguistic, cultural and/or historical attributes and leading to distinctive patterns of public policy outcomes' (Castles, 1993a: *xiii*).<sup>43</sup> This offers the potential to develop and test explanations that simultaneously consider the effects of Irish national characteristics and those associated with one or more 'families' to which Ireland belongs. It also provides a basis for filling in the ranks of other countries to include when comparing North and South.

In terms of true macrolevel comparisons, Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland are suitable cases along with other cases for comparisons concerning crime and crime victimisation, social mobility, poverty, voting behaviour, labour market entry and educational participation. Certainly, the other part of the island is a more plausible comparative case than England or the Netherlands for many purposes. Moreover, Ireland can be viewed as a naturally occurring experiment in which one macrosocial case became two cases. Interconnections between the North, South and Britain also offer potential insight into, for example, the treatment of minorities in new states. For example, an understanding of public opinion and political party behaviour in the North and South is a product of a three-way interaction of Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland and the British government.

Comparative thinking depends on the application of theory. There are

<sup>43</sup> A good starting point might be the claim that the Republic of Ireland does not belong within the English-speaking family of nations: 'Our view is that to include Ireland would distract the analysis for its main objects, which is to establish what it is about the other five English-speaking nations which made them seek to refashion the relationship between state and economy to a degree unparalleled elsewhere in the world of capitalism (Castles, 1993b: 5).

'traditions' of theory and research that link North and South. One such link is the importance attributed to the state and to social class by Bew and his colleagues (e.g., Bew *et al.*, 1995) in the North and by ESRI sociologists (e.g., Rottman and O'Connell, 1982; Breen *et al.*, 1990; O'Connell and Rottman, 1992) in the South. Both theoretical perspectives seek to explain social change through an investigation of the evolving link between class and state. It is likely that both perspectives would be sharpened through an application to the island's other case. A specific application to the educational systems of the two jurisdictions is particularly apt, touching on an important topic in the literature on nations and nationalism (e.g., Gellner, 1983).

Theoretical perspectives from the literature on ethnicity and class stratification also resonate well with the macro-level issues raised by a comparison between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland. One set of theories relate to the interrelationship of class and ethnicity, notably those offered by Parkin (1979) and Hechter (1975). Another approach is through the work of Charles Tilly (1996) on citizenship, identity and social history.

The ability of theory to frame North/South comparisons will depend, in part, on the degree to which attention is paid to the micro-foundations of macro-level theories. The comparative method is blunt and sterile if it operates entirely at the macro level of nations or regions. Indeed, true cross-national comparisons use the individual as the unit of data collection.

Finally, the social psychological barriers to North/South comparisons need to be recognised and addressed. Scholars in the South are clearly more comfortable framing comparisons to Australia, Japan or the Netherlands than to Northern Ireland. Comparative work in the North tends to be framed to locate other cases with sustained political instability and ethnic conflict. A region can serve as a unit of explanation or as the context for comparisons. There is an unrealised potential for the North to stand as a point of comparison with the Republic.

A paper reciting the difficulties of comparative research might seem destined toward a gloomy set of conclusions about the prospects for North/South comparisons. There is however scope for one-on-one comparisons between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, and for more broadly drawn comparative efforts embracing both Irelands and other cases. Given the number of studies comparing the Republic to Australia or to Switzerland and the North to Lebanon and South Africa, it is difficult to comprehend how reasons of theory or method can push the North and South beyond one another's comparative reach.

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