

Reading Course on Big Structures, Large Processes, Huge Comparisons

Organised by Waltraud Schelkle

Thursdays, 15:00-17:00

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The title of this reading course is taken from a slim book of the same title, written by Charles Tilly (1984). It clearly formulated what researchers in the beginning of the social sciences were interested in. Today, this comes across as a provocation of trying the impossible. This course encourages researchers to think big without abandoning their rigorous contemporary training. Participants may take it because they are interested in general education as social scientists. It contains classic readings, underestimated classics and future classics. It is actually of direct interest for those whose research touches on the evolution of modern polities, from the nation-state to the democratic welfare state and the EU as a supranational political system. Whatever the motivation, the course tries to demonstrate that engaging with grand debates, empirical research on well-specified research questions becomes more interesting and relevant.

The seminars offer participants to read important books thoroughly. This means to reconstruct the original research problem that made the author take on such a Herculean task and how they solved or transformed it into a more researchable question. We study the research design with which they tackled it and whether we can learn anything from it still. And we learn how one could make such a classic relevant for research today by drawing the lineage to one's own research, in support of it or as a challenge. By taking this course, researchers will not only get to know some of the important books in this field of research on state-formation but also learn how to situate their own research in the debate of fundamental questions in political science.

Requirements: readings, participation, preparation of short paper/discussion questions, project.

Learning Outcomes: Learn to identify research designs and methodologies that can be applied to solve wide-ranging research problems. Learn from key examples how to parse the literature and develop a rationale and justification for a dissertation puzzle. Understand different explanations for state building and polity formation in history and how they can inform contemporary research on sovereignty, state authority and European integration.

1. Situating your research in grand debates: Tilly ([1984](#), hard copy only)
2. Advances in comparative-historical analysis: Mahoney and Thelen ([2015](#)), editors' introduction and one chapter (the latter of your choice)
3. Big Structures (1): Bartolini ([2005 pp.1-115](#))
4. Big Structures (2): Grzymala-Busse (2023)
5. Large Processes (1): Tilly (1990, [2nd ed.](#), hard copy only)
6. Large Processes (2) : Steinmo ([2010](#))
7. Huge Comparisons (1): Skocpol (1979, [online 2015](#))
8. Huge Comparisons (2): Gourevitch ([1986](#), hard copy only)
9. Project presentations
10. Project presentations and final discussion: the role of grand debates in well-specified research

Project: Take Tilly's (1984) delineation of huge comparisons as a starting point: individualising, universalising, variation-finding and encompassing comparisons. Devise a research design for one such comparison that is relevant to your thesis topic (regardless of whether you will be able to do such a huge comparison or, more likely, not in your PhD). It should have at least 3,000 and not more than 5,000 words, excluding the bibliography but including footnotes and endnotes.

Additional requirement: For weeks 3-8, seminar participants must upload two paragraphs on the reading: what struck you most about the book and what would you like to discuss why? This is due by 18:00 on the previous day.