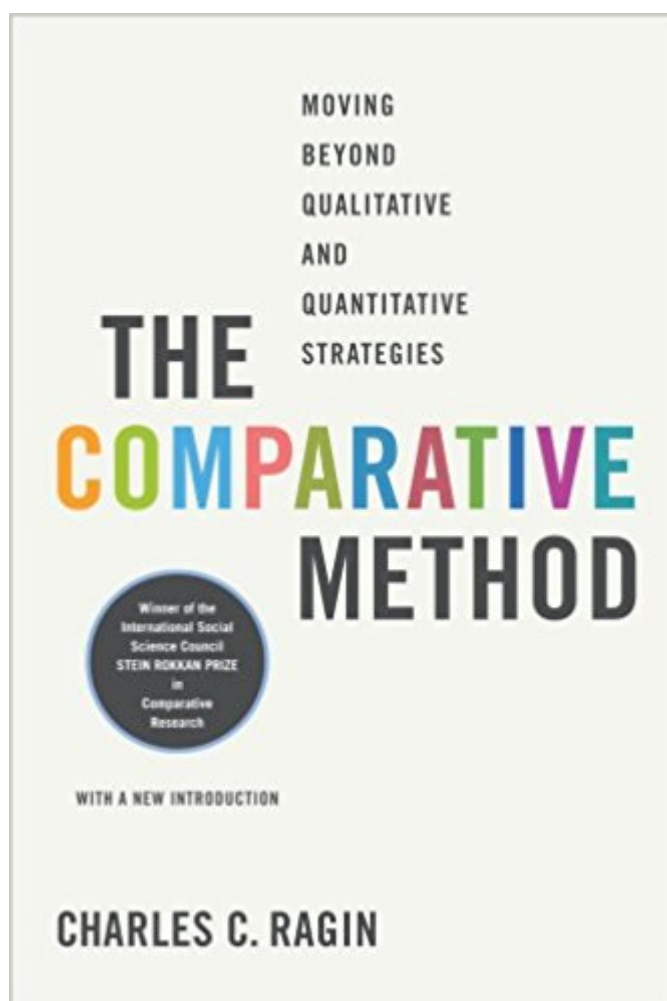


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The Comparative Method: Moving Beyond Qualitative And Quantitative Strategies



Synopsis

Charles C. Ragin's *The Comparative Method* proposes a synthetic strategy, based on an application of Boolean algebra, that combines the strengths of both qualitative and quantitative sociology. Elegantly accessible and germane to the work of all the social sciences, and now updated with a new introduction, this book will continue to garner interest, debate, and praise.

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Customer Reviews

"This is a readable and useful book . . . an extended essay on one particular method, which is easy to understand, easy to apply, and generally useful. The method itself is implemented in a computer technique. . . . This method will systematize the analysis and produce an elegant statement of the combination of conditions which lead to a divided working class--provided there are no contradictions in the data. Where there are contradictions, Ragin's method will identify these combinations of conditions that lead to an ambiguous result."--William Miller, "Study of Public Policy

"This splendidly original work . . . will become an epistemological landmark appreciated by many different schools of thought that have wrestled with the methodological problems Ragin raises and answers."#151;Daniel Chirot, University of Washington"Charles Ragin has produced a well-argued and highly provocative contribution to the growing literature on methods of comparative and historical sociology. While not everyone will agree, all will learn from this book. The result will be to intensify the dialogue between theory and evidence in comparative research, furthering a fruitful symbiosis of 'quantitative' and 'qualitative' methods."#151;Theda Skocpol, Harvard University

As a PhD candidate, I heard about 'the Comparative Method' a while ago when I studied methodology. I thought I'd give 'the Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA)' a try. I have not yet gotten to later books developed by Ragin, where elaborates on QCA and 'the fuzzy sets'. Thus, this review judges this book by itself. Has it convinced me that 'the Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA) is important? It certainly seems so. He spends the first half of the book, as well as the last chapter, defending the QCA method, which is supposed to take strengths from both the qualitative and quantitative methods. That is, while variable-oriented approach is limited by simplified conceptions of cause, the case-oriented approach is limited by its inability to address large numbers of cases. The QCA is supposed to be the middle-road between the two extremes. It is supposed to allow investigators both to digest many cases and to assess causal complexity (p.168). Convinced? I certainly found that Ragin's desire to bridge the qualitative and quantitative approaches was valid. He develops good arguments from Chapter 1 to 5 why the current approaches are inadequate, including combined strategies (which use both qualitative and quantitative methods simultaneously). The evaluation of the QCA is that it holds a lot of promise. Chapter 6 develops basic concepts that help you understand the Boolean algebra, which Ragin exemplifies with simple data. The problem comes with Chapters 7 and 8, which are respectively supposed to describe 'extensions of boolean methods' and 'show real-life examples'. In practice, Ragin rushes through these chapters, throws us into the water, without teaching us how to swim properly. What do I mean? With table 8 onwards, he begins addressing procedures of complex examples. However, he skips many steps, making it untraceable how he develops resulting formulas. If you follow the steps from Chapter 6, you will see that you are encountering a complex situation which was not addressed earlier. Instead of explaining all the steps of a complex example, Ragin simply jumps from the beginning to the "final result". Consider, on p.119, where he throws this formula: $(T)(R') = (B + aCd)(AB + CD) = AB + BCDA$ As a matter of fact, tracing steps outlined in Chapter 6, should lead us to this equation $AB + BC + aC$, not $AB + BCD$ (verified by two other people). So what is going on? You never find out, because Ragin never addresses the rules of his method in the complex examples. This is sign of a poorly developed methodological structure - whereby the reader cannot follow all the steps. The argument he makes is that the book is too small to describe details. However, he spends a lot of time re-addressing issues with other approaches, as well as showing similar examples, without even once addressing how he works with complex formulas. This is a major weakness which makes this book a poor guide to QCA. That said, the book has its own uses. For very simple examples, this is a good introduction to the QCA. It will enable you to understand

the goals of QCA, its strengths and weaknesses. However, for exact procedures, you will have to rely on Ragin's latter publications.

This is what I used to do my dissertation and I highly recommend this to researchers using qualitative methods; more public health researchers should try QCA.

I recommend this book because it is an approach which can be used in many areas. Despite the first edition, this is amazing!

Good!

Ragin's classic on comparative analysis is a must for any sociologist or social scientist more generally. Ragin spends his early chapters discussing some problems of current (at the time) methodologies: too unlike reality, too focused on independent effects of variables, not configurational enough. Then, Ragin presents his argument for getting beyond the qualitative/quantitative divide by introducing a different method of mathematical analysis of comparative data: Boolean Algebra. By coding for the presence or absence of certain factors, Boolean Algebra allows for the assessment of collections of variables (like interaction terms, only more complex) and seemingly brings together mathematical precision and qualitative depth. While there are certainly some problems with the book (what on earth are the cases we are considering and how does one select them? How do we determine what are salient "variables" to include in the "truth tables"? etc.), it remains a classic of methodology and the corner stone of the methods that Ragin continues to develop (QCA, Fuzzy Sets, etc.). This is a must for most social scientists. Otherwise, it will make for dry reading.

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