

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

JOHN GERRING, *Case Study Research: Principles and Practices*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007, x + 256 p., index.

John Gerring's *Case Study Research: Principles and Practices* is a very thoughtful and thorough contribution to case study research guides, albeit one with a distinctly positivist bent. Gerring's concern is that despite the fact that "much of what we know about the empirical world has been generated by case studies" (8), they are nonetheless often maligned. In part, Gerring argues, this disrespect is left unmitigated by its practitioners, who frequently have difficulty outlining their own methodology. In consequence, a research culture appears to have arisen, whereby "[t]o say that one is conducting a case study sometimes seems to imply that normal methodological rules do not apply" (6). Gerring's goal in his text is clear: to overcome the methodological ambiguity around case study research through a concise articulation of the logical and sometimes even quasi-experimental means in which case studies can expose causal relationships. In so doing, Gerring intends to validate case studies as valuable and legitimate ways of conducting research.

Given the problems with the acceptance and practice of case study research, Gerring provides a valuable service in trying to uncloak the "quasi-mystical qualities" of the case study (7) and give merit to its position in social science research. As indicated by the subtitle of his text, he approaches this task in two ways, focusing first on the principles (Part I, *Thinking about Case Studies*) and secondly on practices (Part II: *Doing Case Studies*). In both sections Gerring draws on well-known case studies from the social sciences – with particular emphasis on political science – to discuss the approach's strengths and weaknesses.

In Part I, Gerring tackles the methodology of case studies, exploring terms and definitions in order to sort through the confusion which often arises with respect to what exactly constitutes a case study. He further explores the purposes of case studies, and how they operate with respect to hypothesis generating and testing, and investigating causal relationships. The thrust of this discussion is to situate case study research in relationship to cross-case analysis, and to demonstrate how they operate on a continuum towards the same goal of generalizability. While case study research relies on "evidence drawn from a single case," this evidence is not an end in itself; rather, just like cross-case analysis, the case study operates to "illuminate features of a broader set of cases" (29).

A significant portion of Part II is dedicated to techniques for choosing case studies. Notably, it emphasizes a quantitative approach to selecting cases, largely at the expense of all other methods, and usually assuming an available data-base of the variables of interest. This drastically narrows the applicability of this section for quite a number of practitioners, who would not have access to the data required for such a positivist approach, or the resources to amass such data for themselves. The prominence of political science examples of country level comparisons reveals the most likely application of such an approach. Of more general applicability, Gerring outlines case study analysis approaches (quasi-experimental and process tracing), which helps cast the causal conclusions of case studies on a par with more venerated research methods.

A significant strength of this book is the attention to detail with respect to differentiating the case study from the cross-case method and to elucidate the motivations behind various research decisions. Gerring's main accomplishment here is to help those interested in using the approach to understand the strengths and weaknesses of their choice in a larger methodological picture. His position is succinct: "Whatever the field, and whatever the tools, case studies and cross-case studies should be viewed as partners in the iterative task of causal investigation" (85). Without a doubt, Gerring ably demonstrates that case studies and cross-case analysis are not necessarily antagonistic, but have a great deal of affinity. He does a significant service to practitioners on either side of the qualitative-quantitative divide by demonstrating the means in which the two can not only complement each other, but can be simultaneously employed in the same research project for the greatest effect.

To some extent then, Gerring's book can be used as a response to critics who complain that case studies are not sufficiently rigorous, and that they can be neither scientifically replicated nor generalized: essentially, that they are pseudo research. To be sure, we have all read questionable case studies by those who partially cloak sloppy research with claims to the less strictly defined case study approach. However, Gerring's often high level of abstraction and plethora of tables, statistical calculations, and use of Latin terms sometimes seem to dabble in legitimation through scientization, rather than being essential components for the understanding and effective practice of the case study approach.

While the motivation for eschewing those who consider conducting case studies an intuitive art is clear, there is equal danger in overstating the manner in which such research (often, but not always, qualitative) can be made "objective." Understanding and articulating into which box in a typology your research falls does not in itself improve the quality of that research. Nor does being able to translate the logic of your case selection criteria into a mathematical formula necessarily improve it. These actions can assist in causal thinking, but are not essential. Further, while it is true that case studies employ methods that are general, a common characteristic of the case study is the use of multiple methods. It often is – a sad fact (for some) or an investigative thrill (for others) – a process involving those

terms which evoke such derision (art, intuition, or cunning) that allow one to ferret out the necessary data for a strong case study. Once again, while Gerring makes a good argument for restoring the legitimation of the case study approach, his very positivist perspective might further marginalize the value of those case studies less amenable to such a perspective.

A further concern relates to the “method behind the madness.” Gerring does not attempt to explore the specific methods – such as interviews, fieldwork, or document analysis – which might be employed in the course of a case study. As a point in fact, he notes in his introduction that he has no interest in doing so, preferring to focus on the issues which are specific to case studies. However, a positivist interpretation of case study selection, for example, without a discussion of the ways in which concept construction and ultimately operationalization can affect the outcome might lead to some statistically sound but nonetheless highly deficient case study selections. Simply stated, the most scientifically rigorous, variable-based case selection can only be as good as the data which goes into it. While Gerring is indubitably aware of such issues, and occasionally makes reference to them, his decision not to discuss them more fully seems a disservice to the goal of methodological legitimation he is attempting to accomplish.

There is little doubt from this work that Gerring has a great depth of knowledge about research methods, and he uses an impressive number of cases to support his discussion and provides a wealth of avenues for follow up for interested parties. It is unfortunate that those who have a fear of statistics will not find solace in the positivist approach presented in this book: this is a book on case study research which talks to those who are already comfortable with quantitative analysis. It is very unlikely to entice the quantitatively disinclined to re-conceptualize their case selection or analysis in this more positivist light. While Gerring himself manages to demonstrate a level of prowess with methods which allow him to swing proficiently between quantitative and qualitative approaches, he is slightly less proficient at making this balancing act accessible to those not already so inclined.

This book will be most suitable to graduate students entering their course of research, or to senior academics pursuing a deeper understanding of the case study approach. In particular, given the above qualifications, it will be most interesting to researchers whose “case” can be strengthened through a more positivist methodological orientation, and who have the inclination and resources to do so. Pedagogically, it would best operate in conjunction with broader perspectives on the case study approach, such as those presented by Robert Yin and Robert Stakes.

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