
Mapping the way forward in comparative management: a conversation with Gordon Redding

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As part of the journal's commitment to further scholarship in the field, we invited Dr. Gordon Redding, a renowned academic in the comparative management space, to participate in a discussion to expand the boundaries of thought leadership in comparative management theory.

Dr. Redding has over 40 years of experience in research and writing in comparative systems of capitalism, with an Asian focus. He has published 15 books and 150 articles related to these subjects. Over the course of his career, much of his time was spent in Asia: He lived in Hong Kong for 24 years, where he founded and directed both the Hong Kong University Business School and Poon Kam Kai Institute of Management at HKU, which offers executive education training, and in Singapore for five years as a senior advisor to the Human Capital and Education for Asian Development (HEAD) Foundation. In addition, he spent seven years in France at the helm of the Euro-Asia Centre in INSEAD. Prior to his academic career, he spent a decade as an executive in the retail industry in the United Kingdom. This experience influenced his work and piqued his interest in organisational theory. Currently, his focus is on the comparison of different systems of capitalism and on the role of education and societal progress.

This interview can be considered a retrospective of Dr. Redding's seminal paper on comparative management theory that was published in 1994, *Comparative management theory: jungle, zoo or fossil bed?* It also encapsulates his current thinking on the topic. Dr. Redding shares his thoughts on the progress made since that publication and reflects on his departure from Hofstede. He also discusses the importance of comparative investigation and delves into the concept of societal processes, which feature prominently in his latest work. It is based on years of researching different patterns in how societies evolve to become prosperous and "modern".

The following discussion seeks to provide a road map for comparativist researchers.

Gordon, more than 25 years ago, you made an assessment of the comparative management space and wondered whether it's a jungle, zoo, or fossil bed. When I first read your paper, I thought of Harold Koontz's paper, The Management Theory Jungle, and his 20 years of prospecting of that.

What I'd like to ask you is, where are we now in the comparative management space, a quarter-century down the road? And there are several journals promoting comparison, if not in name, definitely in substance. Please take it away.

Thank you, Baba. I appreciate the opportunity to reconsider what, as a group of scholars, we have been doing for a very long time. Let us also acknowledge that a 45-minute conversation is not the same as a fully referenced review that takes months to write. We can here provide an overview but not detail. So, to make some condensed contribution to the detail, I am adding a list of 'required reading' for any adventurers who might be interested.

But let me first add a little personal background, if I may, so as to explain 'where I am coming from'. I grew up in Liverpool, in a family immersed for generations in global trading. My great grandfather had in the 1870s been Superintendent of Mercantile Marine for Liverpool when it was at the height of its power as a world port. The first industrial revolution had started with the railway between Liverpool and Manchester in 1830, and the inland factories of the then world's workshop were sending goods out to foreign markets and receiving raw materials and food in return. I grew up living at the end of 14 miles of docks and cycled to school past endless massive warehouses and processing factories. My father was a greengrocer, and I helped out in the evenings, unpacking the apples from New Zealand, the grapes from Spain, or the strange sticky root vegetables from Africa. The parents of my friends either 'went to sea' or worked in global factories. Our teenage music came straight from America with records brought back by stewards on transatlantic liners. Russian sailors on the Arctic run who bought crates of oranges at our shop to prevent scurvy could not speak English, but I could talk to them in schoolboy French. At school, my favourite subject was geography, and I went on to Cambridge to study it there. I later worked for a department store company as a central buyer and bought goods from all over the world.

So, I grew up thinking globally. As a department store manager, I became fascinated by the then-new concept of management, and to pursue that interest left industry and did a Ph.D. at Manchester Business School. That is where I met my first academic mentor, Richard Whitley, one of the founding fathers of comparative business systems theory. My thesis was examined by another such founder John Child.

My interest in comparison was by then such that I took a position at the University of Hong Kong and, as Director of the HKU Business School, set about filling what I saw as a large gap in understanding the variety of business systems in Asia. There is nothing like a class full of young executives on an MBA or a corporate executive program, almost all of whom are working internationally, to concentrate the mind on what to say to them that is relevant to their needs. Under that stimulus, I took the view that they needed to understand their own business behaviour and where that comes from, to understand also the same issues from the standpoint of other cultures, and to seek two outcomes. First, to see yourself as distinct and why. Second to see the others you deal with for how and why they work. Then to use the understanding to add to your own ideas about how

management can be practised. The greatest forms of capitalism have been built as hybrids and were very clearly visible in Singapore and Hong Kong. I later came to appreciate other hybrids in Japan and South Korea. To live and work in that region in its golden years was a great privilege and inspiration.

Let me also acknowledge here the influences of other mentors and long-term friends whom I met after moving to Hong Kong. Primary among these was Peter Berger, who wrote the defining work on culture, *The Social Construction of Reality*. Another was Lyman Porter, who co-authored in 1966 the first book on comparative management *Managerial Thinking: An International Study*. I also owe much to Henry Mintzberg for his pioneering work on managing organisations, and to Arie Lewin for his inspired editorship and adventurous mind. And always my students who taught me much in return. For talking to executives, I pay tribute to the vision of Michael Alexander in leading the Wharton International Forum with its years of on-the-ground exploring in North America, Asia, and Europe.

Now let me return to your question about where Comparative Management has come to over recent decades. As I have just said, we should bear in mind certain criteria: to understand the other's system; to see one's own system in comparison; to find what might be improved in both.

So let us begin with the reason for conducting the research process. And searching for that rationale inevitably begins with the need for societies to progress in order to improve the quality of people's lives. And if you look at studies of societal progress or 'modernisation' over the last several centuries, there are three lessons of history that keep returning. The first one is that no society can progress unless it learns to adapt and to change itself. Secondly, and related, it needs to change itself if it is to cope with the rising complexity with which it is surrounded. And thirdly, it cannot cope with that complexity in order to change itself, unless the size of its brain – the proportion of people thinking about and managing adaptiveness – is large; in other words, the job of deciding what to do is shared throughout the society. And that is wrapped up in a word now very crucial in theory: empowerment. In a rich literature on that, my favourite (and different) accounts are those of Steven Pinker and Christian Welzel, and their massive evidence for a basic connection between empowerment and progress is very convincing.

Now, when the empowerment is working, and people are thinking: 'what should we do with our society as a result of what we learn from other societies?' Or 'what should we tell other societies to do as a result of learning about ourselves comparatively', the brains which are engaged in the problem need to be responsible for the consequences of what they do. This brings forward the question of their moral position, the inspiring answer to which was provided by (among many others) Elinor Ostrom, and which is based around the notion of civicness – the idea of public good, or 'virtue'. As Robert Heilbroner once observed, the reason that free-market capitalism produced such wealth is that it had invented a more benevolent form of domination than any other previously.

There is endless philosophy on the question of progress. When you look at the failures of development – and there are many – they normally are accounted for by saying that the society could not cope with the complexity because the people who are doing the thinking about what to do about it did not take enough account of protecting the public good.

A quite different intellectual challenge in research on such questions is that of method. If you are dealing with the question of comparing in order to improve something very complex, you need to deal with an epistemological problem – a problem of

scientific theorising. The best advice on that comes from Thomas McCarthy, eminent in the field, who says that it is possible to find general requirements applicable everywhere, which are then interpreted specifically, society by society. To make comparison valid, that means you have to agree on the end result that all societies should be judged by. This means their ability to reach a certain ‘condition’, regardless of how they reach it. Then you do not get caught up with being ethnocentric, which is a sin in the epistemological context.

So, what constitutes that condition? This is like asking how do you define a person in good health. The basic ideal features can be defined, but how to achieve them depends on the individual. For a society, if you’re looking for factors which in McCarthy’s terms would be seen as universals, are they institutions? Well, not entirely. Are they values? Again, not entirely. There’s something deeper and more universal than those things (which are themselves measurable). In other words, the universals which we are all bound by may be fundamentally unmeasurable, but they still have to be conceivable; and then represented by the components that contribute to them. These latter may be measurable. And they are likely to be differently interpreted, society by society.

A long time ago, some earlier methodologists described this iteration between the two levels as running between the nomothetic, which is the theory-building, and the idiographic, which is the empirical. And the best practices of comparative management run up and down between the two. This opens the field to new inquiries, ideally multidisciplinary and factory-floor grounded and conducted, if you want to understand another society in its own terms.

So, you could argue, for instance, that a lot of us learned a great deal from bringing aspects of Japanese management into the West as with quality circles, just-in-time logistics, production flows. Earlier the West also taught Japan a great deal in the Meiji Restoration at Japan’s invitation and did so again after World War II. So, it’s a two-way flow. If you look at Singapore, a great focus of Confucian dynamism, more than half of the Cabinet were educated in Oxford or Cambridge. Also, if you look at respect for Chinese culture, the British Empire was built by people called the Whitehall mandarins. So, the processes go both ways. And the mandarins also use Arab numerals.

If we look at the literature which has dealt with the above kinds of research challenge, acknowledging the larger picture is rare, perhaps because the leadership of such a mission is diffracted: also, perhaps because few people are trained to think in the multidisciplinary terms needed. Taking a lesson from one of the greatest ever surges of scientific knowledge, we might note the observation by Ernest Rutherford of the Cavendish Laboratory in Cambridge (home of nuclear fission, atomic structures, DNA, etc.). He said that science is either physics or stamp-collecting. Comparative management theory might need to prioritise building its core integrating general theory (its physics) before doing any more ‘stamp-collecting’.

This is enormously important. From your talk, I learned quite a few things. One is, you’re not very happy with the way the field has progressed, and secondly, you’re moving much more in the anthropological direction. Let’s take a look at your elaboration of where we have gone wrong. Gordon, you made a number of very important recommendations in your seminal work in 1994. Where are we?

In that earlier review, the first recommendation (and previewing then what I have just now said about physics) was to try to identify types, or clusters, in order to then proceed with the idiographic so that you can move the theory forward and theorise more

effectively. Now, much success in that is visible in the large literature on comparative capitalisms. That literature began with scholars of Japan such as Ron Dore and Jim Abegglen. It was expanded at Harvard by Hall and Soskice, but the richest conceptual work on it came from Richard Whitley of Manchester Business School. And that surge was a major success. It has produced a large literature, it takes notice of the complexity involved, and it deals with that seriously. It also rests clearly on deep empirical grounding.

The use of abstract models, which was the second recommendation, has also progressed in several directions: the great Chicago School theories of Joel Mokyr and Deidre McCloskey and others have been built on their base of deep historical knowledge; other key contributions include Granovetter's 'embeddedness' of economic behaviour; Eisenstadt's 'communicative action'; Fukuyama's extensions into political structures from his key work on trust and now returning to that crucial sub-category: 'identity'; Cardwell and also Taylor on turning points in growth; Ostrom on collective action; Piketty on inequality. And there are many others listed later as recommended readings.

There has therefore been a great deal of advanced theorising on the big issues. Because the theme has been societal progress in general, such work does not always deal directly with organisational management, but it nevertheless provides much understanding of the societal contexts which shape much managerial behaviour. And without that context being included, managerial behaviour cannot be comparatively analysed. Our discipline would then become shallow, except for the key large-scale integrating in further work on comparative capitalisms, e.g. that of Michael Witt and other authors listed in the readings. And except for the new linking themes such as complexity, co-evolution, thick description, resilience, etc., championed by Arie Lewin and others, also listed.

For me, the major breakthrough in dealing with those large issues is the work of Christian Welzel, *Freedom Rising*, which is to me the most astonishing piece of social science of the last 50 years, and rests upon the world values surveys of Ronald Inglehart, which ran for decades and produced a gigantic amount of comparative data.

What Christian Welzel did was to say if you want to understand why a society is like this or like that in the way it behaves, learns, and produces its social traditions and practices and ideals, you have to go back about 40 millennia and look at the ecological conditions in which those responses were first formed. There is, in other terms, an invisible, ancient path dependency that – if it blocks change – will hinder adaptiveness. Over those aeons of time, cultures began to separate out in the way they handled authority and identity. Thus (explaining simply), many states instinctively depend on an emperor or emperor equivalent for reasons to do with survival for most people, having always depended on strong control of irrigation water and food distribution. By contrast, many cultural ideals of individualism and freedom formed originally on the plains of northern Europe in conditions where survival through hunting and foraging was fostered by such ideals. One cannot ignore 40,000 years of habituation. More normatively, his theory of 'the freedom ladder of progress' is both exciting and deeply grounded in the evidence. And that work, I think, still has a very long time to run in terms of its significance.

The third recommendation I made at that time was to encourage middle-range theories. And I would identify a number of these. The most important of them is complexity theory and its ally adaptiveness theory, now visible in concerns with 'resilience'. The work on societal complexity and scale by Geoffrey West at the Santa Fe

Institute is also very significant. Similarly, Max Boisot's work on information space, Prigogine's work on complexity and adaptation, the work of Foucault and of Mokyr on the use of knowledge, Arie Lewin's work on co-evolution and on resilience. These are all about responding to rising complexity: the fundamental issue in a society's transition from the pre-modern to the modern.

So, there was a lot of progress to enrich other parallel accounts, but not many people cover that whole territory. It's very hard to integrate because of the amount of reading you have to do, and the number of conceptual frameworks you have to keep in mind can be daunting. And there is always McCarthy's sobering warning about grand theorising carrying the risk of hubris or charges of megalomania. That is why the constant grounding in ethnographic reality is needed to keep a theorist's feet on the ground. Charles Darwin remains a formidable exemplar.

The fourth recommendation was to move on from Hofstede. Geert was a good friend, and we had many fruitful conversations over decades. What he did was to inject the first severely rational picture into the field of comparison. The use of it then enriched his own theory, as with the fifth Confucian dimension that emerged from his work with Michael Bond, whose own disciplined and prolific work on comparative culture has contributed so much, e.g. on social axioms as a key category. Hofstede's pioneering was to create a language and a set of convincing categories that people could understand. Its impact remains unequalled. So, hats off to Geert Hofstede.

The fifth recommendation was for alternative clusters to those defined by national boundaries. And there, in deference to Peter Berger's socially constructed reality, the idea of distinct provinces of meaning has brought much new understanding, as via fields of meaning within an industry or a trade, or other subsets of a society, down to corporate cultures. At a more macro level, the work of Nisbett on the geography of thought has also added much.

The sixth recommendation is to shut down mindless positivism. That has not happened. There is still a lot of 'stamp-collecting' reaching the journal reviewers.

The seventh was the trap of using culture as a primary cause. This doesn't happen so much now because the multiple-determinant models that acknowledge complexity, reciprocation, history effects, 'thick description', co-evolution etc., are now more common and more sophisticated. And it's not possible any longer just to say that culture is the sole cause of this or the other but rather a nudge in a certain direction.

Coming now to the ultimate question of what we are trying to explain. I propose such an explanandum by extrapolating from what was said earlier. Societies (and by extension organisations) need to see themselves in comparison with others so that they may remain capable of learning something that assists in their own continued survival. This requires that some understanding is built of what (at an abstract level) any society needs to cultivate as its set of competences. These may well be culturally embedded, but they are that society's ways of delivering the universal competences.

This is brilliant. You know, there are a number of points that you touched on, and I want to focus on a couple of things. The first one is that you parted company from Hofstede, whom you admired and appreciated and worked with. Hofstede's notion was the universality of values that is rooted in the individual. You have seriously elevated the optimisation point of comparison from individual to society, and the mechanism is to focus on processes. Can you elaborate on why you did that? In other words, Hofstede and his cross-cultural management theory was hugely popular, and you

outline the reasons why it was hugely popular. Outline why you moved away from it. I like the movement because what you have done now, it provides a link. Hofstede did not provide a link, and all of a sudden, you are providing a vertical link. And that is brilliant. Tell us more about it.

As I have said earlier, Hofstede's contribution was immense, and it remains a pioneering starting point for sketching very significant tendencies. But it was never intended to take on board the complexities of the bigger question of societal progress. Outside what he is always known for, I know from our conversations that Geert was deeply aware of those issues, and a close reading of *Culture's Consequences* will show that. But societal progress questions have risen in significance, as better comparison has driven curiosity about the implications it carries (a feature we comparativists might take some credit for).

I will not here run through the sources I recommend as they are given in the reading list. Instead, I will take from them certain common themes. And those commonalities seem to me to be best conceived as *processes*. As specific institutions, they become societally determined, when instead what is needed for comparison of outcomes is that the institutions are seen as specific societal interpretations of certain desired universal commonalities, and the commonalities become the matters of interest. What can be defined as the necessary elements within those commonalities across societies are (in my view) eight societal processes. This permits a move towards more physics and less stamp-collecting (while risking hubris and megalomania).

This is very good. You have provided a context, both to where Hofstede stood and where you are standing, and your attempts to connect the two. I was reading your work and the most brilliant, as I see it, is the connectivity. You are moving up and down to the societal level all the way to the individual level. But the challenge, though, Gordon, is the things that connect are so complex they constantly came from level to level to level, and to clean that up is going to be a challenge for you and a challenge for a lot of us who are going to be looking at this as a guiding light for theorising.

Well, the model I have come around to, after a great deal of cogitation, is the one I think I mentioned to you as my latest thinking. It comes from struggling with models over some years, there being at least six versions during this one's emergence to its present form. The logic of it is that if a society is to master the complexity it's surrounded by sufficiently to become modern, it will have acquired the capacity to produce and fairly distribute a great deal of wealth. What then are the universals that successful modern societies have displayed? I break these into three main societal competences, each containing a set of processes. A societal competence is the ability to deliver a certain quality in the society's overall behaviour, such as trustworthiness, an acceptable morality, productivity, efficiency, adaptiveness, fairness of distribution, empowerment.

The first of three categories of desired universals is the *Context of Encouragement*, and this has two related processes within it, (a) enough benevolent and moral authority, with distributed empowerment, for people to feel free to think for themselves. Then (b) processes in the society to use that mental freedom in freely reasoned and informed, critical thinking and discourse. Like what you get in a good seminar, at a good university. What you get sitting with the gang at the pub, talking about politics. Or what you shout at politicians seeking your vote.

The second category contains processes that enable the *Transformative Capacity* of the society. Some societies resist change. Others societies change naturally. Some do it

instinctively; some do it by organisation. But if you break that down into the processes which make transformation possible, (c) the first is innovativeness and adaptiveness: that there is an acceptance of change, a willingness to accept it, and inventiveness to make it possible. (d) The second is cooperativeness. The sense that you can make things change without breaking society apart. People still say we're on the same team. (e) And thirdly, which is the political process, a balance of the interests. So, you give something which advances the capitalists, but you also have to give something which advances the workforce. And you can't manage to keep the society progressive unless that balancing process is achieved.

The third overall category is ***Empowered Action***, and it contains three sets of processes: (f) the first is communicative action, as identified in Jurgen Habermas' theory with that name, and echoed in Deidre McCloskey's theory of bourgeois virtues; and many other theories which say that if you have a set of people in the centre of the society such as those responsible for a business or in any of the professions, or scientists etc. and they communicate with each other about what action should happen next. (g) The second is spontaneous emergent ordering; if the key actors are capable of institutionalising the agreed action with new systems, so that in a sense they run the society's detail themselves in terms of its order – then you have progress. (h) The third category is the test of the effectiveness of all the other bits coming together, which is competitive productivity. And competition adds the dynamism and the discipline of the market to the wider logic, in which case you fit in Hayek's arguments, which say that free-market competitive logic is essentially the most efficient answer to the problem of complexity, since price reduces complexity to one number. And you can make the economy work at a very high volume and density of activity that way.

When you put the three platforms of the ***encouraged context***, the ***transformative capacity*** and the ***empowered action*** together, with the subcomponents, all of which are processes, (complex but you can put an envelope around them) – then you get societal progress, which I define as betterment by wealth created through legitimate order, better use of assets, sharing of benefits, the cohesion of ideals and benevolent moral authority.

All theory is an attempt to map practice. So, such a proposal would be an invitation to improve the map by exploring the reality of practices on the ground. And so too to keep making the mental transition from the ground to the map and back again, in some sense improving both in the interests of the ultimate purpose of societal progress in a changing world.

You're already persuading me, Gordon. This is quite illuminating, and I find a lot of value in the interpretive notion that you have put forward. And now you are introducing a lot of richness to the comparative management space. You brought issues of anthropology, you've got issues of philosophy, you've got issues of sociology and political science and so on, in the space. It is going to seriously enrich the research potential in comparative management. Now, let me ask you your view on methodology. You have introduced the whole notion of qualitative studies, to use a generic title. And you also talked about the limits of positivism as an optic of inquiry. Now with your three platforms, and your arrows in the model, do you think that we may want to look at triangulation as a possible dominant strategy in the comparative management space? What is your view on methodology?

Well, the methodology question is answered by the notion of the idiographic (symbols such as numbers grounded in reality to represent ideas), which match the nomothetic

(the finding of ‘laws’ connecting phenomena). So, the nomothetic is the theoretical framework, such as that proposed, and the idiographic is the empirical test of that. Secondly, the idiographic is the empirical demonstration of variations and interpretations of what is proposed at the nomothetic level. That may well mean adjusting the nomothetic, as long as what is proposed at that level remains universal. What is ideographically described empirically is not universal. That’s why it is comparative. So, what we are doing is taking the essentially non-comparable (because they are culturally embedded) behaviours on the ground and moving them up a level so as to analyse their function in the societal total built of processes. Then we can compare the functioning of that nomothetic total and its parts against the criteria that bind all societies trying to make progress.

I believe that most sciences, social or otherwise, move forward by somebody drawing a map, saying this is how things work. But there is a special feature in social science. Its reality is only accessible through the filter of meaning. Peoples’ behaviour is a response to their own understanding of reality. Nothing can ever be absolutely proven because of that filter of meaning. So social science cannot fully copy physics. Let’s not call that a handicap. In a sense, we do not have the luxury of studying solid objects, but it does not stop us from getting as close as possible to that ideal base for understanding causation. The compromise we make is to accept the role of meaning as a filter and so to allow some elasticity between the two levels. And then to make probability judgments based on evidence. That does not prevent us from building general theory as informed conjecture at a point in time. We will then not be caught out by the seductive simplicities evident in some social research that copies the natural sciences too closely.

I think you have given us a lot. The model that you have described, Gordon, allows us to look at new variables and new connections at different levels and connect them. This is extremely valuable because you have offered a multi-level model to complement, and in some minds replace Hofstede’s work. And to use your word, that is progress. And now, to close the interview, I’d like to ask you, what would be your advice to scholars who are working in the comparative management space and editors like me, who are guiding the field? Any parting thoughts?

Well, I think it would be useful to inject some normative ideals into the discipline. And to say, for instance, this journal stands for the understanding of societal progress as a public good - with global relevance. And we have to be modest about how we do that. But how we do it is to say that we believe there may be out there certain universals, which, although they’re very complex, and although they can only be understood in a multidisciplinary way, can explain why some societies are more advanced than others. Why there is a middle-income trap? Why there is inequality all over the world? Why so many people are so very poor? That needs to be understood. And we think we have a framework within which to understand it and that the work of the journal is to fill the gaps in knowledge, and in turn, enrich the model. In other words, to tweak it to add to it, to adapt it. So, it gets better as time goes on, but at least, in a way, we know where we’re going. And it’s up to the contributors to decide how they themselves want to get there, with at least an outline map as a guide.

It is also crucial to leave open the question of whose definition of the public good is the best. That is a question that can only be settled on the evidence of the performance of societies pursuing improvement to the sum of human happiness. A working assumption

is that at the ground level, different societies might become equally happy, but at the theory level, the same abstracts will still hold, or we will not yet have done good enough ‘physics’.

Dr. Redding has compiled a list of recommended readings for those who may wish to expand their knowledge on the topic of societal and cross-cultural comparison. The following is that list.

Further readings

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