

CHAPTER THREE:
METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES

Introduction

In this study I use a comparative and historical methodology to delineate the relationships between state labor law strategies and union strike effectiveness in the United States and Great Britain during the 1980s. To highlight the particular methodological strategy implemented here, I begin with a brief review of the different ways in which comparative and historical techniques have been used in sociological research. Next, I discuss the rationale underlying my utilization of case studies on selected union strikes as a way to capture and assess the effects of state labor law policy on union power.

Comparative and Historical Methods in Sociological Research

Introduction

As Ragin notes (1987: 1), in the broadest sense "[v]irtually all empirical research involves comparison of some sort." Specifically:

[r]esearchers compare cases to each other; they use statistical methods to construct (and adjust) quantitative comparisons; they compare cases to theoretically derived pure cases; and they compare cases' values on relevant variables to average values in order to assess covariation.

In the social sciences, however, the case more commonly has been that "the term comparative method is used in a restricted sense to refer to a specific kind of comparison--the comparison of large macrosocial units" (Ragin, 1987: 1; emphasis in original). This type of research typically involves the articulation of distinct social phenomena, such as nation-states, institutional complexes, or smaller social formations, for the purpose of uncovering patterns of divergence or convergence between cases. Indeed, this usage of comparative analysis has been an integral element of the sociological enterprise since the discipline's classical era, with the works of Marx, Durkheim and Weber providing premier examples (e. g. Skocpol, 1984a: 2-7).

Importantly, these same classical thinkers also relied heavily on historical analysis to develop and buttress their respective theories of society. A "historical imagination" has remained, to varying degrees, part and parcel of the sociological enterprise ever since (Skocpol, 1984a: 1-21; also see J. R. Hall, 1992: 164-166). In fact, paralleling assertions on the ubiquity of comparison, some contend that all "[s]ociological explanation is necessarily historical" (Abrams, 1982: 2). As Abrams (1982: 2) elaborates, "[a]ll varieties of sociology stress the so-called 'two-sidedness' of the social world...a world which our actions construct and a world that powerfully constrains us...[This]...two-sidedness...is inseparably bound up with the fact that whatever reality society has is an historical reality."

Like the notion of "comparative sociology", however, "historical sociology" is also frequently used in a relatively narrow sense. Skocpol (1984a: 1; emphasis in original), for example, notes that "historical sociological studies highlight the particular and varying features of specific kinds of social structures and patterns of change." More specifically, such studies

...ask questions about social structures or processes understood to be concretely situated in time and space...they address processes over time...[they attend] to the interplay of meaningful actions and structural contexts (Skocpol, 1984a: 1; emphasis in original).

Though ideally any and all works professing to exhibit a "sociological imagination" would contain these historical elements (Mills, 1959), research that does typically has been relegated to the status of disciplinary sub-specialty (e. g. Skocpol, 1984a: 2).

Overall, it is only a slight exaggeration to state that sociologists have used comparative and historical techniques in tandem nearly as often as they have used them independently of one another. For instance, a strategic union of these two methodologies characterized many of the seminal sociological treatises of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, with the works of Marx, Durkheim and Weber again providing the most notable examples. Such a combination also found expression in the functionalist-inspired studies of modernization and industrial convergence that marked the 1950s and 1960s (e. g. Huntington, 1968; Kerr et al., 1960). Beginning in the 1970s and 1980s, an elective affinity was also in evidence between comparative-historical approaches and substantive research in the area of political sociology (e. g. Evans et al., 1985b: 348; Skocpol, 1984b: 359).

Historical institutionalism, which I initially discussed in Chapter Two, represents the most recent intellectual effort at integrating comparative and historical techniques for the study of politics and social life (e. g. Immergut, 1998; Steinmo et al., 1992). Indeed, though

encompassing a highly diverse literature, one broad similarity shared by most historical institutionalists, as implied by the label, is a penchant for the comparative and historical analysis of political institutions (Thelen and Steinmo, 1992: 10-13). More importantly, another similarity marking most historical institutionalist work, namely a mutual concern with the dialectical interplay between agency and structure (Rothstein, 1992: 35; Thelen and Steinmo, 1992: 10), pertains to the theoretical and epistemological reasons that comparative and historical methodologies are employed. To these differing rationales for comparative and historical research I now turn.

Skocpol's Typology

Though converging in the simultaneous utilization of comparative and historical techniques, sociologists have nonetheless varied widely in terms of how they specifically combine the two methodologies and, more importantly, for what epistemological or theoretical ends (e. g. J. R. Hall, 1992; McMichael, 1990; Tilly, 1984). Skocpol (1985b; also see Skocpol and Somers, 1980), for example, describes three different comparative-historical research “strategies” that frequently have been adopted by

social scientists. Each of these strategies has differing notions regarding the importance of theoretical and conceptual issues and how they are related to historical and comparative data. However, despite their divergent tacks, "[t]he three major strategies are not hermetically sealed from one another; [and] creative combinations are and always have been practiced" (Skocpol, 1984b: 362).⁵⁹

The first strategy Skocpol delineates involves the application of a pre-established theoretical system to divergent social and historical settings. Specifically, "a practitioner of this approach is chiefly interested in demonstrating and elaborating the inner logic of a general theoretical model" (Skocpol, 1984b: 365). Comparative and historical data are used to provide empirical support or substantive examples for the researcher's pre-existing yet "empty theoretical boxes". Examples of this type of strategy, according to Skocpol (1984b: 364-365), can be found in the works of Parsonian structural-functionalists (e. g. Smelser, 1959) and in the more economically deterministic Marxists (e. g. Schwartz, 1976).

⁵⁹ Tilly (1984) puts forth a typology similar to Skocpol's. In turn, Hall (1992) and McMichael (1990) develop more detailed classification schemes that essentially build on the insights of both Skocpol and Tilly. I rely on Skocpol's earlier typology because I feel it more elegantly captures fundamental distinctions among comparative-historical research strategies.

Of the three strategies Skocpol addresses, she is most critical of this "model application" approach to comparative and historical research. Indeed, Skocpol (1984b: 366) notes that many studies of the model application type can "in principle be...subject to charges of tailoring historical [and comparative] presentations to fit a preconceived theory." The primary problem is that the theoretical model in question is typically highly elaborated well before there is any substantive and systematic articulation with empirical data. Perhaps more significantly, the data derived from comparative-historical analyses of this sort rarely lead to any substantial modifications of the initial theoretical paradigm. Thus, as Skocpol (1985b: 366) further chastens, "the entire exercise can seem like a highly unaesthetic imposition of sociological jargon onto arbitrarily selected and arranged historical facts."

In contrast, two other types of comparative-historical research allow for a greater intermeshing of theoretical concerns and empirical evidence. One approach, which Skocpol (1984b: 362) labels "analytic historical sociology", aims to "discover causal regularities that account for specifically defined historical processes or outcomes." While the interest in developing explanatory generalizations creates the appearance of a convergence with the model application approach, the analytic strategy differs sharply when it comes to theoretical rigidity and

universalistic pretensions. More precisely, the analytic strategy explicitly recognizes the contingent nature of all causal patterns and entails an on-going consideration of alternative hypotheses and explanations.

Ultimately, "[t]he investigator's commitment is not to any existing theory or theories, but to the discovery of concrete causal configurations adequate to account for important historical patterns" (Skocpol, 1984b: 375).⁶⁰

Compared to the analytic strategy, what Skocpol calls "interpretive historical sociology" is even more sensitive to contextual variation and even less enamored with the task of establishing or reinforcing an abstract theoretical position. Specifically, this third approach aims to provide "meaningful interpretations" of social life by paying detailed attention "to the culturally embedded intentions of individual or group actors in the given historical settings under investigation" (Skocpol, 1984b: 368). In effect, the primary goal of interpretive historical sociology is to document the dialectical interplay of agency and structure in particular social locations.⁶¹

⁶⁰ Skocpol offers her own research (e. g. 1979), along with that of Barrington Moore (e. g. 1966), as demonstrating the analytic approach to comparative-historical research.

⁶¹ Examples provided by Skocpol of this type of research include Bendix (1977; 1978), Starr (1982), and Thompson (1966).

Two other characteristics mark efforts in interpretive historical sociology. First, though comparative and historical examples are sometimes used to demonstrate convergent similarities, such data are often used "for the specific purpose of highlighting the particular features of each individual case" (Skocpol, 1984b: 369). Indeed, demonstrating divergence between cases is typically the primary aim of the interpretive historical sociologist. Second, though critical of general theoretical models or abstract causal hypotheses, those using the interpretive strategy are by no means atheoretical, for a pressing theoretical or conceptual concern typically gives impetus to the research to begin with. Indeed, some make the argument that, as evidenced in recent historical institutionalist research, interpretive historical sociologists:

are going beyond using history as a "method" and are turning to history as a "theory" or philosophy. That is, they emphasize the irregularities rather than the regularities of history and demonstrate the limits of universal causal models (Immergut, 1998: 19).

The Present Study

This research is perhaps best characterized as incorporating elements of both the analytic and interpretive strategies for comparative-historical research. The study takes on an analytic hue, for example, with respect to the broad hypothesis that state-initiated changes in labor law in Great Britain and the United States during the 1980s contributed to the respective decline of organized labor in each country. Thus, this investigation might be viewed at one level as attempting to demonstrate the existence of a specific 'concrete causal configuration' (e. g. the political manipulation of labor law) across different social contexts (e. g. Great Britain and the United States) in order to account for a convergent 'historical pattern' (e. g. union decline). From this restricted angle, then, some might understandably conclude that some level of explanatory generalization is the primary motive behind this research.

This nomothetic thrust is more apparent than real however. On balance, I am less concerned with emphasizing a 'convergence' between Great Britain and the United States in terms of similar causal configurations and more with empirically detailing the concrete

historical relationships between state labor law projects and union crises within each country during the 1980s. The theoretical discussion in Chapter Two hopefully highlighted the variable nature of the relationships between 'state', 'law' and 'society', and for this reason I feel a more detailed historical understanding of labor law in both nations is needed. Overall, then, the comparative-historical strategy utilized here can thus be broadly characterized as a variant of what Skocpol deems the interpretive approach.

At a more specific level, however, this study's methodological rationale is even more accurately depicted as an example of what Locke and Thelen (1995) call "contextualized comparison".⁶² With this particular strategy, similar or like cases are selected for examination and the purpose of systematic comparison is to highlight both divergence and convergence. As Locke and Thelen (1995: 338) put it:

Contextualized comparisons are meant not to displace but rather to complement traditional matched comparisons; they bring new insights...by highlighting unexpected parallels across cases...and, conversely, by underscoring significant differences between cases typically seen as "most similar".

⁶² Tilly's (1984: ix) idea of "individualizing-comparison", which entails "attempts to clarify the characteristics of the case at hand by means of contrast with another well-documented case", is also reflective of the comparative logic I utilize in this study. For useful overviews of comparative logic in macrosociology more generally, see Goldstone (1997: 107-120) and Goldthorpe (1997: 1-26).

In the context of the present study, then, I am critically attuned to both similarities and dissimilarities between the British and American cases, for I feel that this allows for a more meaningful understanding of the relationships between unions and labor law within each country during the 1980s. I shall further address this point in the discussion that follows.

Collective Labor Law as the Independent Variable

Returning to concerns that I initially expressed in Chapter One, the literature review on union decline pointed toward an urgent need for continuing research along two pivotal lines (e. g. Robinson, 1988: 42-49). One involved the necessity of giving more systematic consideration to the role played by political factors in the crises experienced by many Western organized labor movements during the 1980s. Another pertained to addressing the notable lack of cross-national research that was truly 'comparative' in nature and sufficiently detailed with respect to union decline in differing national contexts. Overall, recognition of these two pressing issues served as a primary impetus for the present investigation.

With respect to the first issue, a wide array of research possibilities exist. Because the articulation of political institutions and labor unions occurs along myriad fronts, the research problem at hand could, to adopt positivist parlance, be "operationalized" in any number of ways. That is, both the "independent" and "dependent" variables of this study, "political factors" and union "decline" or "crisis", respectively, are empirically indicated in multiple ways and their interrelationships are evidenced along even more numerous dimensions. Examining all conceivable connections would be an extremely arduous, if not impossible, task. Even addressing the impact of a selected number of 'political factors' on limited aspects of the organized labor movement would be quite unwieldy, especially once refracted through a comparative and historical lens. Ultimately, then, a significant narrowing of the research problem has to occur, and I hope that what is lost in breadth will be regained by the more focused depth of the present analysis.

To help in this narrowing process, a conceptual distinction by Burawoy (1985: 125-126) serves a useful heuristic purpose with respect to operationalizing the independent variable. Burawoy maintains that state interventions into capitalist industrial relations can be broadly characterized as either one of two types. First, some interventions have

the primary purpose of facilitating and guaranteeing the on-going reproduction of labor power. In effect, through what Burawoy calls “social insurance legislation”, state policies attempt to secure a minimum standard of living for working people and their families. Such supports not only ensure the continued physical existence of wage laborers, but usually elicit the latter’s social and political acquiescence to the existing order as well. Examples of this type of political intervention include such things as minimum wage policies, social welfare measures, and a host of other public assistance programs.

Another medium by which the state intervenes into processes of capitalist production is through what Burawoy (1985: 126) broadly characterizes as “labor legislation”. Compared to social insurance legislation, the effects of which generally impinge indirectly on the labor process, this second mode of state intervention affects the relationship between capital and labor much more immediately. Specifically, through labor legislation “the state directly circumscribes the methods of managerial domination which exploit wage dependence” (Burawoy, 1985: 126). Encompassed here would be regulations pertaining to contracts of employment, grievance arbitration, and most importantly for purposes here, collective bargaining practices.

A more refined conceptual distinction of labor legislation proves useful in further honing the research problem at hand. The broad notion of labor law itself can be broken down into more specific types based on the particular level at which state interventions and policies are directed. What is often labeled “individual labor law”, for example, is aimed at the employment relationship between individual employees and employers, whether the latter be a single entrepreneur, a large firm, or a multinational corporation. Relevant laws in this respect include various regulations pertaining to hiring and firing practices, disciplinary procedures, as well as wage agreements and other conditions of individual employment (Goodman, 1984: 181-186; also see Marsh, 1992: 1).

In contrast, what can be characterized as “collective labor law” refers to those state interventions which are aimed at “regulating the collective relationship between management and trade unions” (Marsh, 1992: 1; emphasis added). As Goodman (1984: 186) defines it:

Collective labour law is the legal framework of collective labour relations, covering such subjects as collective bargaining, collective agreements, trade unions, industrial disputes, strikes, picketing and the closed shop.

Frequently, the state’s collective labor law policies may give rise to a separate and distinct regulatory system in relation to that of individual labor law. In other instances, however, a significant intermeshing might

exist, both procedurally and substantively, between collective and individual labor law practices.

In light of these distinctions, I reasoned that a narrower and more systematic focus solely on state collective labor law policies would be useful for assessing the role of politics in the crises of Western organized labor movements during the 1980s. Though a variety of state policies and actions can affect the activities and power of labor unions, the two institutions are most often brought into explicit and direct contact through the medium of collective labor law. Thus, I anticipated that political efforts to curb the potency of organized labor likely would be implemented through channels of collective labor law. Overall, this consideration in turn helped lead to the selection of Great Britain and the United States as the two cases through which a better understanding of the political factors potentially involved in union decline might be obtained. The reasoning behind this decision is discussed in greater detail below.

Great Britain and the United States as Case Studies

After reviewing the literature on union crises in Western capitalist democracies during the 1980s, I concluded that several common features shared by the political and economic contexts of Great Britain and the United States made the two countries especially useful cases for comparison. To begin with, the decline of organized labor in the United States and Great Britain was arguably quite substantial during the 1980s. This is true not only in terms of such indicators as union membership and density levels, but also in terms of other indicators relating to collective bargaining, political influence, and, as I will elaborate below, industrial conflict.⁶³ In any event, in order to assess the role of political variables in union decline, the cases selected for comparison had to be undeniably characterized as exhibiting a "decline" or "crisis" of unions during the time period in question.

More importantly, once I decided that collective labor law policy was a fruitful locus for uncovering the role of politics in union decline, the appropriateness of selecting the United States and Great Britain

⁶³ I feel the need to emphasize at this point that while I used the 'decline' in union membership and density rates as indicators for this more general descent in Chapter One, I did so only for purposes of illustration. As I will soon make clear, my specific indicator for 'union decline' in the present research will be strike effectiveness, not union membership or density figures.

became even more evident. Of the six largest Western OECD countries, only the United States, Great Britain, and France evidenced significant changes in the nature and administration of collective labor law policy throughout the 1980s.⁶⁴ In the case of France, however, state-enacted changes in collective labor law were for the most part supported by those in the French labor movement. Indeed, the "Aurox Laws" implemented by Mitterrand's socialist government were in some respects seen as a way to ameliorate or reverse the crisis of French unions (e. g. Smith, 1987).⁶⁵ In the United States and Great Britain, in contrast, the widespread administrative and legislative changes in collective labor law policy enacted by the Reagan and Thatcher administrations respectively, were strongly criticized, if not resisted, by union members and labor supporters in both countries. In fact, many in the labor movement prophesied that such changes would effectively undermine the potency of labor unions, an argument that I am in part trying to assess in this study.

Other factors make the experiences of organized labor in Great Britain and the United States throughout the 1980s ideal for

⁶⁴ I should note that there were also some legislative changes made in Germany with regard to union strikes, though this was not until the latter part of the decade (e. g. Ferner and Hyman, 1992a: xxix; Turner, 1991: 101).

⁶⁵ In retrospect, the Aurox Laws ironically did more harm than good for the French organized labor movement (e. g. Howell, 1992). I will further address this issue in Chapter Eight.

contextualized comparison. For example, during that decade in both countries governments ascended to power that converged markedly in their conservative rhetoric and neo-liberalist free-market policies (e. g. Krieger, 1986).⁶⁶ Further, recall that both countries were characterized as having broadly similar postwar settlements, what Regini (1986) called ‘pluralist fragmentation’, in terms of basic form or structure. In addition, the industrial relations systems of Great Britain and the United States are again broadly similar in that they have long been premised on adversarial, as opposed to more cooperative, relations between labor and management (e. g. Bamber and Lansbury, 1987).

Strike Effectiveness as the Dependent Variable

With Great Britain and the United States selected as national cases for comparison, and state collective labor law policy deemed as an independent variable of sorts, a key task remaining was the operationalization of this study’s dependent variable. As I argued in Chapter One’s review of union decline literature, the strength or power of

⁶⁶ As I further discuss in Chapter Four, the collective labor law policies of the Thatcher and Reagan administrations were each largely formulated against the backdrop of a broader and more encompassing neo-liberal state project.

organized labor can be expressed in a variety of ways. Union membership and density levels, for example, are two of the more frequently used measures. Other possible indicators include the scope and outcome of collective bargaining negotiations, the influence of trade unions in political decision-making, and the frequency and character of industrial conflict.

As was necessary with respect to politics as an independent variable, I had to be selective in terms of which facet of union power to focus on. I chose strike effectiveness, operationalized as the substantive outcomes of selected labor strikes, as my indicator for union strength. My reasoning was that while state collective labor law practices impinge on the ability of unions to act in a variety of ways, it would likely be in situations of overt industrial conflict that they would be most visible and, in many respects, most important. More precisely, since a concerted work stoppage tends to be the most potent weapon in organized labor's arsenal (e. g. Hyman, 1972: 20), it follows that political attempts at legally curtailing union power would likely target this activity. Such an attack would have secondary consequences in other areas as well, most notably in the collective bargaining arena.

The structure of this study and the concern with determining the substantive outcomes of labor strikes necessitated that my analysis be

more qualitative, rather than quantitative, in nature. Like union membership and density levels, the use of statistical indicators of strike activity, whether in terms of frequency of stoppages, dispute duration, or even conflict outcomes, is fraught with many difficulties when it comes to comparative analysis. Bean (1985: 129) captures the primary obstacles as follows:

An immediate problem, however, in the cross-national comparative analysis of strikes is not only that it may be of limited value if industrial conflict takes diverse and uncorrelated forms between countries, but also the fact that the strike itself is not a homogenous phenomenon. It can have different meanings and significance in different parts of the world, as well as fulfilling varying functions over the course of time.

Furthermore, with respect to the concept of strike effectiveness in particular, McCammon (1990: 215) has noted that 'effectiveness' can be measured in a variety of ways, including in terms of wage increases, membership increases, and workplace control. Importantly, which measure is most useful is dependent on the specific goals of striking workers. In light of these problems, I concluded that an in-depth, qualitative examination of a limited number of labor disputes, by allowing for a more valid assessment of strike effectiveness, would be more useful than a broader focus on some form of strike statistics.

I decided to select six different union strikes, three from Great Britain and three from the United States, for detailed analysis. My

reasoning was that three cases from each country would provide a modest level of case variation without proving extremely unwieldy. Several different criteria guided the strike selection process. First, I had concluded that the strikes eligible for selection had to have occurred in 1984 or afterwards. The rationale underlying this criterion was that the respective collective labor law strategies of the Thatcher and Reagan administrations had not reached "critical mass" until this time. While the historical development of each state project is addressed in detail in Chapter Four, brief mention needs to be made here about why I see 1984 as pivotal for collective labor law policy in both countries. In Great Britain, though legislation had been enacted throughout the decade and beyond, the fundamental contours of that nation's "revolution in labor law" (McIlroy, 1988: 65) had essentially been established with the enactment of the Employment Acts of 1980 and 1982 and the Trade Union Act of 1984. In the United States, the National Labor Relations Board "took its sharpest ideological turn in 1983" after the appointment of a new chair and soon put forth several key decisions "that went a long way toward reducing labour's ability to find redress through the law" (Moody, 1987: 160-161).

A second significant criterion pertained to the length of the labor disputes that were considered eligible for selection. I reasoned that the

strikes to be analyzed had to have been lengthy enough whereby legal intervention by the courts and other state institutions would have been likely. Many industrial conflicts are quite brief, being resolved by the parties involved within days or a few weeks. While the use of law may certainly be an integral factor in the resolution of very short disputes, I felt that the salience of the law would generally be higher in lengthier conflicts. In addition, the selection of longer strikes would provide a greater window of observation through which to capture the role of state legal practices in the conduct and outcome of industrial disputes. For these reasons, I decided that the strikes selected for analysis had to have lasted six months or longer.

While the above qualifications were of primary concern, other criteria were also considered in the selection process. One involved the temporal spacing of the disputes in each country. Though not a stringent requirement, I did feel that a sampling of strikes occurring at different points in time between 1984-1990 would be better than a sampling that clustered around a particular year or period. I reasoned that a loose chronological sequencing would provide enough historical variation to reveal not only any constant effects of the state labor law projects, but any cumulative effects as well.

Other factors apply more to the institutional nature of the unions themselves rather than to the character of the disputes they were involved in. For example, I felt a tradition of union militancy to be a desirable characteristic because I reasoned that such unions might be more likely to provoke state intervention and thus provide greater insight into the workings of the new collective labor law policies. Another concern was that the strikes selected be by unions located in the private sector, preferably in basic industry or manufacturing. Not only did these private sector unions suffer the most marked decline in the 1980s (e. g. Troy, 1990), but cross-national variations in public sector industrial relations could prove problematic.⁶⁷

With the above factors in mind, I reviewed all of the major labor disputes that occurred in Great Britain and the United States from 1984 until approximately 1990. This information was obtained primarily from major national papers, such as Wall Street Journal and the Financial Times of London, though other sources proved useful as well (e. g. Daily Labor Report for the United States, various industrial relations publications for Great Britain). I eventually settled on the following strikes for analysis. With respect to the United States, the 1986-87 strike/lockout between the United Steel Workers of America and the USX

⁶⁷ As will soon become evident, I made one exception with respect to the private sector criterion.

Corporation, the 1987 strike between the United Food and Commercial Workers union and John Morrell & Company, and the 1989 strike by the United Mine Workers of America against the Pittston Coal Company were selected. With respect to Great Britain, the disputes selected were: the 1984-85 strike by the National Union of Mineworkers against the National Coal Board, the National Graphical Association's 1986-87 conflict with News International, and 1988 strike by the National Union of Seamen against P&O Ferries.

By selecting the 1984-85 British coal strike, I did bend my initial criteria somewhat. The National Union of Mineworkers is a public sector union, whereas the other five are all private sector unions. Two reasons prompted me to make this exception. First, the strike itself was "the longest and most significant dispute in modern British industrial history" (Towers, 1985: 8), and it represented the initial test of the Thatcher administration's new labor legislation. Given the focus of the present research, I could not reasonably ignore such an event. Second, having also selected a coal strike in the United States, the British coal

strike served a heuristic purpose as a type of control variable for strike variations across industries.⁶⁸

Synopsis

At this point I would like to reiterate the research objectives and methodological rationale of the present study. Chapter One's literature review on the crisis of Western organized labor movements during the 1980s revealed two research demands. One need entailed giving more rigorous attention to the role played by politics in union decline, while another pointed toward the necessity for more systematic comparative research on union decline in various countries. In Chapter Two I elaborated on a theoretical framework that I felt provides substantial insight into the role of politics, specifically as mediated by the state, in social life. This strategy-centered approach emphasized the historically variable and problematic nature of relationships both between state and society and between political institutions themselves.

⁶⁸ In this regard, the selection of the 1989-90 UMWA dispute against Pittston, technically occurring under the Bush administration rather than the Reagan administration, also represents an exception of sorts. I justify this exception by noting that there was a close affinity in the collective labor law projects of the two governments and that the dispute had occurred before any significant policy changes were made by the new Bush administration (which took office in January 1989).

In this chapter, the broader problem of the role of politics in the crisis of unions during the 1980s was specified to a narrower level that would allow for manageable empirical research. In particular, the independent variable "politics" was operationalized as collective labor law policy and the dependent variable of "union decline" or "crisis" was operationalized as strike ineffectiveness. I also reached the conclusion that Great Britain and the United States would be useful cases for comparing the impact that political factors had on union crises. Overall, then, my main research question can be stated as follows: What effects did changes in collective labor law policy have on union strike effectiveness in Great Britain and the United States during the 1980s?

My specific methodology for measuring the impact of legal changes on union strike effectiveness entails an interpretive analysis of three union strikes in each country. I feel that comparing the qualitative data from these six cases, both within and across the two countries, will allow for a partial, yet more meaningful, understanding of the role played by political factors in the crises of unions in Great Britain and the United States during the 1980s. These six case studies are presented in Chapters Five and Six. The comparative analysis takes place in Chapter Seven. First, however, I provide an overview of the respective collective labor law projects of the Thatcher and Reagan administrations in Chapter Four.