

## **Review essay: Reconfiguring post-communist comparisons**

Jørgen Møller. *Post-communist regime change: a comparative study*. London and New York: Routledge, 2009. xiv + 177pp. £75.00

Carsten Q Schneider. *The consolidation of democracy: comparing Europe and Latin America*. Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2009. xii + 184 pp. £75.00

Ivan T. Berend. *From the Soviet Bloc to the European Union: The Economic and Social Transformation of Central and Eastern Europe since 1973*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2009. £19.99

Two decades after the collapse of state socialism it has become a truism to say that, although starting from broadly the same points of departure, post-socialist states have moved in radically different political directions. While parts of Central and Eastern Europe have integrated with Western Europe achieving levels of political stability and democratic quality which compare favourably with established democracies (Roberts 2009; EIU 2009), some post-Soviet states descended into new forms of authoritarianism or semi-authoritarianism. More controversial is the question of *which* factors have pulled the countries of the former socialist world in such different directions. A bewildering array of factors ranging from regime legacies to political culture, economic development, geography, modes of transition, institutional choices, and EU and leverage all find committed supporters in literature on post-communist transformation (Kopstein and Reilly 2000; McFaul 2002; Kitschelt 2003; Vachudova 2005; Fish and Choudhry 2007; Way & Levitsky 2007). Such limited levels of agreement are puzzling. Comparative analysis is more often characterised by an uneven, but steady accumulation of knowledge (Mahoney 2003) and, while the causes of democratization remain contested (Geddes 2003), many scholars have seen regionally bounded comparisons as offering a promising way forward (Bunce 2000, 2003; Geddes 2003). Moreover, post-communist states seem to offer a ‘natural laboratory’ for comparison with multiple cases of regime change occurring in the region over the same period against similar background conditions.

*From 'What to compare' to How to compare?*

In many ways the issue may now be methodological than conceptual: how rather than what to compare. Rigorous, focused 'small N' case study comparisons allowing in-depth sifting of evidence have proved highly adept at explaining meso-level differences between individual states in *sub-regions* of the post-communist world. However, more wide-ranging comparison has usually been undertaken with quantitative techniques or the skilled use of traditional broad sweep historical narrative. Both have limitations. Broadbrush narratives enable rich, nuanced accounts interweaving general and comparative observations, but they are necessarily unsystematic and ad hoc. Regression analysis and other standard statistical techniques have rigour and generalisability and are clearly well suited to topics such as the study of elections and voting behaviour, but for many specialists working in Area Studies tradition they are too insensitive to questions of context, meaning and process still central to work on the region (Basedau and Köllner 2007; Ahram 2009). Moreover, as Charles Ragin (1987) has argued, 'variable-oriented' quantitative approaches are, in all but their most sophisticated forms - poorly equipped to explain contexts where causes *combine* to produce an outcome, or where different causal paths lead to the *same* outcome ('equifinality').<sup>1</sup> Precisely such causal complexity seems to characterise 'big picture' questions of comparative post-communist political development.

*Configurational comparison and post-communist politics*

Two recently published studies – Jørgen Møller's *Post-communist regime change* and Carsten Q Schneider's *The consolidation of democracy* – suggest that the 'configurational' comparative methods promoted by Ragin and others may hold the key. In this essay I weigh up these claims, examining both authors' configurational comparative approaches and contrasting the insights they generate with those of traditional narrative-historical overview found in Ivan T. Berend's recent history of post-communist socio-economic transformation *From the Soviet Bloc to the European Union*

Jørgen Møller's *Post-communist regime change* (henceforth *PCRC*) focuses on the question of regime diversity across the post-communist world, which – in a line with many writers on the region - he sees as having undergone a 'tripartition' into democracies, autocracies and semi-authoritarian hybrid regimes. Characteristically for configurational approach, before considering cases or causes drawing on the theoretical literature on concept formation, Møller first carefully unpacks concepts and categories. While accepting the conventional view of liberal democracy as a regime combining liberal freedoms,

electoral contestation (*PCRC*, pp.18-24) and the rule of law - and defining authoritarianism as the absence of these - Møller finds concepts of intermediate regime types such as 'illiberal confused. Logically, he suggests, intermediate regimes break down into two types: 1) 'liberal autocracy' where oligarchies preside over liberal economies and societies but deny democratic competition; and 2) 'electoral democracy' where open electoral competition takes place, but does so in the absence of liberal freedoms and the rule of law (*PCRC*, pp. 22-24).

Testing out the existence of these *four* regime types globally using Freedom House data, Møller finds that, contrary to the arguments of Fareed Zakaria, Larry Diamond and others, hybrid regimes have not become increasingly prevalent, but have, in fact *decreased* in number. Put differently, there has been a trend towards *bifurcation* into full democracies, on one hand, and fully authoritarian non-democracies, on the other. The same pattern is reproduced in microcosm across the post-communist states, although the proportion of autocracies is always higher than that globally. Moreover, as there are so few cases of Singaporean-style 'liberal autocracy', for practical purposes there is only a single intermediate regime type: 'electoral democracy, electoral competition without civil rights or rule of law.

Møller's central research question is to determine whether post-communist regime *bifurcation* is, as Herbert Kitschelt (1999, 2003) influentially argued, best explained by the 'deep causation' of long-term, structural factors, rather than 'shallow' proximate explanations stressing the importance of institutional or policy choices during the transition from communism. The regional clustering of post-communist regimes, Møller argues, provides *prima facie* evidence in support of the Kitscheltian view that underlying historical and structural factors, not contingent choices were the key determinants: post-communist democracies have come to clustered almost entirely in East Central and South Eastern Europe, while post-Soviet Central Asia has turned out almost uniformly authoritarian.

### *Typological analysis*

Testing such a hypothesis, however, poses a considerable methodological challenge both because of issues of causal complexity noted earlier and, in particular, because of the problem of collinearity: both proximate and deep factors may be correlated with a certain regime type, making it difficult using the 'industry standard' method of regression analysis to distinguish which (if either) is the primary cause. To address this Møller uses typological theory (*PCRC*, pp.77-81), a relatively little used form of configurational comparison based on the work of Paul Lazarfeld (1937) and Allan H. Barton

(Lazarfield and Barton 1951), which seeks to produce ‘... a multidimensional and conceptual classification...an ordering on a compound of attributes’ (*PCRC*, p.77). Put more simply, this means the generation of multi-dimensional tables of the kind seen in figure 1 cross-referencing cases and sets of variables. Produced sequentially for different periods and/or different types of causes, such tables cease to be mere exercises in classification, but allow logic inferences about cause and effect.

[FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE]

Møller adopts a two-stage strategy, first selecting, operationalizing and analysing proximate causes; then repeating the procedure for ‘deep’ structural causes; and finally comparing the extent to which ‘proximate’ and ‘deep’ causes coincide in predicting regime type. Reviewing the literature on post-communist democratization, he first picks out the three most widely-cited proximate variables shaping regime type: whether the opposition displaced communist-era elites at the outset of transition in ‘founding elections’; 2) the strength of legislature vis-à-vis the executive; 3) the degree of radicalism of early economic reform. His analysis, which maps regime types in 26 post-communist states at four points (1992, 1997, 2002 and 2007), confirms a gradual bifurcation into democracies and autocracies, which broadly matches proximate factors’ favourableness or unfavourableness to democracy. There are, however, some anomalies: Ukraine – seen by Møller as a hybrid regime – remained semi-democratic despite scoring weakly across all three factors, whereas Russia is authoritarian despite having a more mixed institutional and policy profile, Indeed, interestingly, however elite displacement appears of little importance: Bulgaria, Romania and Mongolia were democracies despite old elites’ domination of their transitions.

Møller then makes a similar selection of three key structural variables shaping regime outcome: 1) levels of socio-economic modernization attained under communism (measured through per capita GDP); 2) cultural and geo-political proximity to Western Europe (operationalized by geographical distance); and 3) the patterns of state-society embodied in different patterns of communist rule as outlined in Kitschelt’s (1995; Kitschelt, Mansfeldová, Markowski and Tóka 1999) famous typology of communist regime types.<sup>2</sup> Here too there is a broad fit between conditions and regime type, which becomes more marked over time as most hybrid regimes eventually join either democratic or autocratic clusters. Mongolia and Romania are again anomalies, democratizing despite unfavourable mixes of

structural conditions. Russia and Belarus, by contrast, might be expected to be semi-authoritarian hybrid regimes, rather than full blown autocracies.

Comparing structural and political-institutional factors, Møller finds that, in general, they overlap, suggesting – because structures precede actors – that ‘deep’ factors are indeed the primary causes of post-communist regime trajectories, with proximate factors merely as transmission and lock-in mechanisms for ‘deeper’ factors. There are, however, several cases where structural and political factors (partially) contradict: Macedonia’s favourable political-institutional profile seems to have been trumped by mixed structural factors to produce semi-democracy, while Ukraine’s relatively favourable structural profile (relative modernity and proximity to the West) seems to have rescued it from the descent into authoritarianism that its poor institutional and political choices would imply. Several cases other with mixed profiles both structurally and institutionally, seem hard to account for: while Romania and Bulgaria successfully democratize, while Russia becomes a consolidated authoritarian regime. Mongolia, which democratized successfully despite possessing only one democracy-enhancing factor (opting for radical early marketization) also emerges a puzzling case. However, Møller does not, however, pursue such anomalies further, concluding, rather unsatisfactorily that Mongolia ‘... is a miracle... it cannot be explained by either the actor-centred approaches or their structural counterparts’ (PCRC, p. 137, p. 162 note 8). Instead, he sees potential Achilles Heel of his analysis in the possibility that regional clustering of post-communist regimes may be due to cross-national diffusion of political norms, rather than common structural preconditions. However, he rejects this on the grounds that regional patterns are too uniform for it to be plausible.

#### *The consolidation of democracy*

Carsten Q Schneider’s *The consolidation of democracy: comparing Europe and Latin America* (henceforth *CDCELA*) focuses not on variations of regime type, but on the successful or unsuccessful consolidation of one regime: democracy. While Møller opts for intra-regional comparison enabling a concentration of sub-groups of countries with similar structural conditions, Schneider opts for broad cross-regional comparison of 32 new democracies drawn from Eastern Europe, the former USSR, Southern Europe (including Turkey) and Latin America, maximising range and diversity. Oddly, however, authoritarian Belarus is included, while some post-communist democracies (Croatia, Serbia-Montenegro, Macedonia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, some post-Soviet Central Asian states) are excluded.

Like Møller, Schneider begins with a detailed conceptual discussion of his *explanandum* (consolidation of democracy, CoD) and also tests it out empirically across a broad range of cases.<sup>3</sup> Sticking, as Møller does, to a standard Dahlian procedural definition of liberal democracy, Schneider (like many other authors) finds the concepts of democratic consolidation in the literature vague and incoherent. He, therefore, redefines CoD as the ‘expected persistence’ of democracy, rejecting the notion that consolidation can be judged on the basis of past stability as well as stripping out concepts relating to good governance found in some definitions of consolidation.<sup>4</sup> He further defines CoD in purely behavioural terms as based on actors’ (likely) actions, arguing that actors’ behaviour will reflect and embody democratic attitudes and well designed democratic institutions (where these exist). On this basis, he develops an original data set based on twelve indicators of CoD, which combine familiar measures such as alternation in office (‘turnover tests’) with novel ones such as demand for constitutional change, the contestedness of election results and media ownership concentration. Cases are given an aggregated post-transition CoD score. No distinct regional differences emerge: successful and unsuccessful cases evenly distributed across post-communist and Latin American cases, although the sub-regional differences between post-communist states noted by Møller are reproduced.

Schneider then proceeds to test hypotheses. His key research question – and most original insight - is to ask whether the successful consolidation of democracy (CoD) may depend upon the goodness of fit between political institutions and socio-historical structures, rather than on a particular institutional design or set of social circumstances. Neither structural nor institutional factors, he suggests, should be seen as favourable (or unfavourable) they are to democracy *per se*, but in terms of what they imply about the concentration of democratic authority. Some social circumstances require the concentration of democratic authority, others its dispersal. Correspondingly, some types of democratic institution concentrate power, while others. Drawing on Lijphart’s (1999) typology of democracies, Schneider additionally suggests that power dispersal can be understood as having two dimensions: vertical dispersal, the extent to which power is (or is not) territorially decentralized; and horizontal dispersal, the extent to which executive power is spread across different political and social groups.

Reviewing the comparative democratization literature, Schneider selects and operationalizes six structural and three institutional variables: socio-economic modernization; levels of education; ethno-linguistic fractionalization; legacies of communism (which Schneider treats as a single regime type); geographical proximity to Western Europe; previous experience of democracy; *de facto* territorial

decentralization; party system fragmentation (in part a proxy for electoral systems); and executive format (parliamentary or presidential). Some social circumstances (ethnic diversity or the social diversity brought about by modernization) call for power dispersing or -concentrating institutions, while others (proximity to the West) are power neutral. Conversely, Schneider controversially suggests, communist legacies create a demand for institutions such as presidentialism and two-party politics, which vertically concentrate power because of the weakness of organized interests in post-communist societies.

#### *Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA)*

Schneider analyses cases and causes using the ‘fuzzy set’ version of Charles Ragin’s (2000) Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA) technique, the most widely used and influential approach to configurational comparison. QCA follows a similar logic to the typological analysis used by Møller. However, instead of simple cross-tabulation it expresses combinations of (possible) causal factors and the cases corresponding to them in a binary ‘truth table’ of one and zeros. It then applies Boolean logic (implemented by a computer program) to reduce the table into simplified set of causal combinations expressed in algebraic form. The more complex and up-to-date ‘fuzzy set’ QCA Schneider uses, refines this approach by assigning cases a degrees of membership in each causal condition and then creates truth tables using cases’ set membership in each possible configurations of causes.

Schneider first applies fsQCA’s set-theoretical logic test for necessary and sufficient causation. Unsurprisingly, giving the range of findings in the democratic consolidation literature, he finds that none of the nine factors picked consistently appears as a necessary condition for CoD (high education levels come closest), although a combination of low levels of modernization and limited previous democratic experience seem to be necessary conditions for the *absence* of consolidation.<sup>5</sup> Schneider - like Møller – then takes a two stage approach to minimise problems of over-complexity.<sup>6</sup> first analysing the relationship of only historical-structural factors with CoD before integrating key structural factors into fuller fsQCA analysis with political-institutional factors. Schneider’s initially finds three structural conditions associated with CoD: economic development, ethnic homogeneity or absence of a communist legacy. However, structural factors alone offer is an empirically inconsistent solution, which fails to cover well consolidated democracies such as Latvia and Lithuania. Moreover, from a power dispersal perspective these three conditions throw up very mixed institutional demands.

In the second-stage integrated fsQCA analysis, Schneider finds his cases represent 22 distinct causal configurations, of which 15 are highly consistent in set-theoretical terms with successful democratic consolidation and four highly consistent with non-consolidation. As he is primarily concerned to examine consolidation in terms of the fit of institution forms to historical-structural conditions, unusually in QCA analysis he does not further simplify the solution through the (partial) inclusion of possible but empirically non-existent cases 'easy counterfactuals' (Ragin and Sonnett 2005) Instead, he moves directly to compare the fit of institutions and structures with democratic consolidation. The results broadly confirm his master hypothesis: the most highly consolidated states exhibit close fit, while complete mismatch produces non-consolidation. This is, for example, the case with weak consolidators like Peru, Ecuador, Bolivia and Guatemala, whose structural conditions require inclusive, but centralized democratic systems, but which instead possess decentralized but majoritarian US-type institutions.

However, as with Møller's *Post-communist regime change*, final analysis leaves anomalies and outliers, many among post-communist cases. Romania is democratically consolidated but as a poor, post-communist state is institutionally over-inclusive (access to) executive power. Still more anomalously, Latvia's inclusive, but territorially centralized democratic institutions are the exact reverse of what a poor, post-communist, ethnically divided society should possess to promote consolidation. Mongolia again appears anomalous, successfully consolidating, despite the fact that Albania, which shares the same structural and institutional was a weak consolidator. However, Schneider suggests, Albania, rather than Mongolia is an idiosyncratic case. While Mongolia's power concentrating institutions are theoretically well matched to its conditions as poor, ethnically homogenous post-communist state, in Albania well matched institutions failed to deliver consolidation because of the outbreak of '...large scale violence and even civil war' (CDELA, p. 96) in 1990s. Closer reading also suggests that Russia and Belarus are in set-theoretical terms less consolidated than levels of social and institutional mismatch would imply, echoing the implication of Møller's findings that additional impediments to democratization are strongly at work.

Broad confirmation of Schneider's institutional fit hypothesis, nevertheless, begs the question: when and how are well fitting institutions chosen? The answer to question in the literature is that such choices take place during or just after the transition period. In a final chapter Schneider examines whether pacted transitions, widely seen as more consolidation-friendly, lead to the choice of

appropriate institutions. This, he hypothesizes, may occur because pacts involve a wide range of socially rooted actors. He finds no states with pacts and socially favourable conditions, which failed to consolidate democracy. Moreover, there are examples of successful consolidators with pacted transitions and *unfavourable* socio-historical conditions. However, as these form only two of six such cases, ultimately he concludes pacts to do not decisively contribute to making fitting institutional choices, leaving the question of institutional choice unresolved.

#### *Comparing configurative comparisons*

Despite using broadly similar methods on broadly similar topics, Møller and Schneider seemingly reach diametrically opposite conclusions: Møller confirms Kitschelt's thesis that deep, structural causes explain patterns of post-communist (non-)democratization, while Schneider finds that, while structures matter, institutional choice matter more for democratic consolidation. To some extent, differences in research question suggest some degree of compatibility: while the emergence of democracy as a *regime* is determined by structural forces, democratic *consolidation* might depends on institutional choice. Alternatively, one might look to Bunce's (2003, pp. 178, 180) suggestion that regime change in some states may be more legacy- and structure -driven than others. Both works' research designs are rigorous enough to allow the facts flatly to contradict them (which they do). However, they contain sufficient ambiguous and outlying cases to suggest that neither proves its case conclusively nor captures the full complexity of the varying relationships between structure and agency.

One particular blind spot seems to be the influence of the European Union on Eastern Europe, a problem perhaps reflecting configurational approaches' need for limited number of straightforwardly measurable and categorisable conditions. While measures of geographical proximity used by both authors capture economic and cultural links with the West, they is a poor proxy for varying and complex the leverage exercised by the EU in the course of its enlargement. The books' findings are, nevertheless, revealing. That Romanian and Bulgarian democracy appear as anomalies in both analyses provides indirect confirmation to Vachudova (2005) and others, who see EU leverage as a key driver of democratization in some candidate states – a point conceded by Møller (*PCRC*, p.137), but glossed over by Schneider (*CDELA*, pp. 37-39.) The EU may also represent an alternative explanation for successful democratic consolidation of Latvia and Estonia, whose ethnically divided societies Schneider finds to be unpromising ground for consolidation.

*Does configurational comparison add value?*

The configurational comparative methods used in both *Post-communist regime change* and *The consolidation of democracy* are highly rigorous, making for quite technical (and occasionally pedantic) works of political science. However, do such methods really add to our comparative understanding of post-communist politics? A concern for conceptual clarity and refinement - ‘illiberal democracy’ for Møller, ‘democratic consolidation’ for Schneider –yields genuine new insights in both cases. However, rigour in concept formation is arguably good practice across all methods. Both books are also conservative, rather than innovative as regards hypotheses, stressing the configurative methods’ role in integrating and testing existing explanations, rather than generating new ones. Rigorous comparative logic makes their findings regarding causation compelling. However, the findings throw up few real surprises, tending to confirm insights already made in small ‘N’ comparative work, and case study literature. Nevertheless, some arresting juxtapositions such as Schneider’s Albania-Mongolia parallel or Møller’s discussion of the post-communist world’s remaining hybrid regimes are thrown up, suggesting new sets of comparative studies cases for in-depth investigation.

Can broad narrative historical treatments of the region such as Berend’s *From the Soviet Bloc to the European Union* offer any insights such more methodologically sophisticated configurative comparison miss? Berend’s book offer rich, thematic account of economic transformation in Central and Eastern Europe from 1973 Oil Shock to the time of EU accession, interweaves broad regional perspective juxtaposing Central and Eastern Europe with Western Europe and contrasts of sub-groups of CEE states and individual national cases. The book traces CEE’s failure to modernize during the late communist period; fundamental economic transformation policies of early 1990s; EU enlargement and accession processes; the role of foreign investment; the social impact of transformation; and the structure of new CEE’s market economics and market societies.

To some extent the author tells a familiar story of rigid Soviet-imposed economic model and lack of a CEE entrepreneurial class hampering innovation and long-term growth. However, he suggests, the widening productivity gap between CEE and Western Europe was as much the result of the dynamism of European Economic Community as the dead hand of the USSR. His overall conclusion is that post-communist CEE’s prospects for socio-economic catch-up with Western Europe are still uncertain.

Certain states such as the Czech Republic, Estonia and Slovenia are becoming globally competitive economies, while for others in South Eastern Europe, the gap with Western Europe may be unbridgeable. Paradoxically, he suggests - seemingly writing before the global economic downturn - slow growth in old member states might increase CEE convergence prospects.

While intended as a general history, *From the Soviet Bloc to the European Union* paints an effective broadbrush picture of how patterns of post-communist economic change differed between Central Europe and South Eastern Europe, but depends for its explanatory power on the quality and depth of the author's scholarship, rather than any formal logic of comparison. Nevertheless, Berend's work still points up how narrative can outperform comparative configurational approaches in certain respects, allowing the clear contrast of parallel and overlapping *processes* such as European integration or stalling late communist modernization policies rather than serving up an elegant but static comparison of different national political systems at a particular point. As Møller pointedly concludes '... the ultimate test requires actual process tracing of the post-communist cases' (*PCRC*, pp.119-120), something neither he nor Schneider seriously attempts.

### *Conclusions*

The application of methodologically self-conscious configurational comparative approaches to the transformation of post-communist world is a welcome development, which promises to fill an obvious methodological gap. Such approaches are clearly well suited to addressing the diversity of cases and causes represented across Eastern Europe and the former USSR and offer a rigorous and subtle means of testing and integrating rival hypotheses. However, the works under review suggest, like any method, configurational comparison has its limits: like quantitative approaches it is highly dependent on the selection and operationalization of conditions (variables) and for insights to be fully realizable require it requires that that researchers have the ability to do drill back down in key cases. Processes and sequences, often so important for establishing causation, also appear to be a weakness. The next step for systematic, large scale comparison of post-communist states and societies may perhaps therefore be development of genuinely 'mixed methods' approaches (Kuehn & Rohlfing 2010) and 'comparative area studies' (Ahram 2009) able to integrate configurational comparison with established qualitative and quantitative methods.

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Figure 1: Møller's typology of post-communist states in 2007 by political-institutional factors and regime type

		+ Strong legislature		- Strong legislature	
		+ Elite displacement	- Elite displacement	+ Elite displacement	- Elite displacement
<i>Democracy</i>	+ Early economic reform	Czech Rep Estonia Croatia Hungary Lithuania Latvia Poland Slovakia Slovenia	Bulgaria Mongolia Romania		
	- Early economic reform				
<i>Hybrid regime</i>	+ Early economic reform	Macedonia	Albania		
	- Early economic reform	Moldova		Armenia Georgia Kirgizstan	Ukraine
<i>Autocracy</i>	+ Early economic reform				
	- Early economic reform			Russia	Azerbaijan Belarus Kazakhstan Tajikistan

					Turkmenistan
					Uzbekistan

Source: Adapted from Møller 2010: 86

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<sup>1</sup> The essential logic of ‘variable-oriented’ research Ragin (1987) argues is formulating a single overall solution for each outcome observed and to follow an additive logic, discretely quantifying the explanatory contribution of each additional causal factor.

<sup>2</sup> Møller takes variants of ‘patrimonial communism’ as promoting post-communism authoritarianism and ‘national-accommodative’ and ‘bureaucratic authoritarian’ communism as favouring democracy.

<sup>3</sup> Schneider also reviews global patterns of CoD, finding that many post-communist states consolidated rapidly despite little pre-transition liberalization, while many successful South European cases experienced much slower consolidations.

<sup>4</sup> Schneider also rejects the notion of democratic consolidation as the permanence or irreversibility of democracy to allow for *degrees* of consolidation.

<sup>5</sup> Such asymmetry of conditions linked with an outcome and its non-occurrence reflect the characteristic complexities of combined causation highlighted by QCA.

<sup>6</sup> In QCA the problem is that generating too many theoretically possible configurations with no corresponding real-world cases (‘logical remainders’). For typological analysis, a multiplicity of configurations would create data-handling problems as it would be difficult to express visually.