Then and Now: 
Comparative Politics

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Is Comparative Politics Special?

In a collective volume published about half-way between THEN and NOW, in 1970, The Logic of Comparative Research, the editors, Holt and Turner, stated: 'The subject matter of "comparative politics" ... has always been ambiguous'. They continued: 'In anthropology and in at least a part of the sociological tradition, the term comparative refers not to a substantive field, but to a method of research and analysis. But in political science few studies in comparative politics have employed the comparative method ... Nor have political scientists

1 The expression 'comparative politics' is used throughout this article, as this is the one which the editors of the Journal chose to adopt. Yet a distinction between 'comparative politics' and 'comparative government' should be made, the former being markedly broader and relating to politics in the most general fashion and in particular outside the state. Such studies are scarcely undertaken: as things are, what passes and is typically referred to as 'comparative politics' is in reality 'comparative government'; it is concerned exclusively with politics within the state or in relation to the state.

2 The books referred to here are only those mentioned or alluded to, directly or indirectly, in the text. They are in no way an exhaustive bibliography of comparative politics works, which would of course be massive, especially for NOW. No journal article is listed. The full references for the works mentioned in this article fall into these categories:

* Classics, pre 1945 *


* THEN, immediate post-war *

produced any writing on the method of comparative analysis that even approaches the methodological work done by the sociologists and anthropologists.' And they concluded: 'In principle, there is no difference between comparative cross-cultural research and research conducted within a single society'.

Yet, despite this strong statement, seemingly wholly justified, comparative politics still constituted, at the end of the twentieth century, a substantive 'section' or 'branch' of political science. It still constituted an 'exception', despite the fact that, in the 1950s, there was some rethinking about its character. This situation deserves examination, as it helps to account for what comparative politics was THEN and what it is NOW, an examination which entails first looking back at how the subject had previously been conceived and, second, at reminding ourselves of the impact which the world events of the first half of the twentieth century had on its character.

What is that branch of political science called comparative politics? A truly tight definition is difficult to give, but at least the broad contours of the area of study can be delineated. The starting point is that comparative politics is concerned with the simultaneous or successive examination of two or more 'political systems', with two qualifications. First, the expression 'political system' normally refers to the state, as the state is typically regarded as the stage on which the most important political activities take place. Second, the comparative aspect does not need to be explicit: it may be implicit. This occurs in particular when what is being analysed is an institution, such as a party, or a mode of behaviour, such as the percentage of voters or the proportion of women in a government. The analysis naturally then implicitly refers to institutions or modes of behaviour which can be found in other political systems.

Broadly speaking, before 1914, comparative politics had successively taken two main forms. Up to the middle of the eighteenth century, the main approach was normative in a large philosophical sense: blueprints for the organization of the society were proposed, a tradition to which practically all the 'classics' adhered, from Thomas of Aquinas to Locke and Rousseau. From the middle of the eighteenth century, however, with Montesquieu linking the two phases, a legalistic and constitutional approach prevailed and indeed came to dominate


and NOW, the most recent literature

3 Holt and Turner (eds), The Methodology of Comparative Research, pp. 5–6.
the subject up to World War I. This was when constitutional rule appeared triumphant; all states, it was felt, would eventually adopt such a rule.

However different they were in their origins, both the more philosophical and the more legalistic phases of the normative approach had one common characteristic: they were general; being general, they did not give comparative politics a special status. The subject-matter was the analysis of the way in which governments (all governments, wherever they were) could best be organized. What was found applicable to one country was applicable to any other.

Admittedly, besides being normative, the approach to the subject was also in part analytical, with the aim of discovering ‘laws’ of political behaviour. Analytical theory was indeed needed by the ‘classics’ to assert that their proposals were not only good but plausible: how society should be organized was presented as the consequence of what was claimed to be human nature in politics.

Analytical theory tended to take one or two forms. It could be ‘global’ and concerned with human nature in general; it could have a ‘middle-range’ character concerned with specific aspects of political life, such as leadership or behaviour within given institutions. Analyses of this latter kind were even occasionally helped by ‘hard science’, mathematics in particular, as, at the end of the eighteenth century, when Condorcet applied his skills to demonstrate mathematical properties of voting processes. The differences between these two types of analytical approaches were to lead to profoundly different versions of comparative politics in the second half of the twentieth century, but they had an element in common (and indeed in common with the normative approaches) they were all concerned with politics in a universal manner. Comparative politics was not ‘special’.

What resulted in comparative politics being considered ‘special’ was, somewhat curiously, the very success of constitutional rule. For this was accompanied by the realization that this type of rule did not have the same consequences in every country. This was indeed already anticipated by Montesquieu who had placed much emphasis on contingent phenomena such as geographical location and climate. However, the true initiator of the notion that country differences mattered was Tocqueville. He was to be followed by a number of observers of politics later in the nineteenth century, by Bagehot, for instance, as well as by those who can be regarded as the founders of modern comparative politics: Bryce, Lowell, Ostrogorski, Mosca, and Michels in particular. The last three, however, and Mosca and Michels especially, were also ‘analytical’: to the description of parties they added general ‘laws’ such as the ‘law of oligarchy’.

This approach was profoundly different from the ones which had prevailed so far. The new emphasis was on empirical studies and on detailed descriptions and generalizations were based on the observations which were made. In short, the process was inductive while practically all the earlier work had been deductive. It was because this earlier work had been deductive that it could be ‘general’. In the new ‘inductive school’, if it can be so labelled, the stress was on the need for political scientists to be modest, to recognize their limitations, and to look at what the world was like, in the same way as botanists had done with plants or geologists with stones. Tocqueville had found out that associations explained the character of American politics better than its constitution; Bagehot had found out that the efficient part was more than the dignified part of the English constitution; Bryce, Lowell, Ostrogorski, Mosca, Michels had
found out that parties, although not mentioned in constitutions, were vastly more significant than constitutions in shaping the character of political life. By 1914, therefore, because detailed descriptions were beginning to be given a place, comparative politics was gradually becoming a separate and 'special' branch of the study of politics.

Yet description and generalizations based on induction might have remained a minority interest so long as it was believed, as was the case before 1914, that constitutional rule would gradually take over the globe and therefore be the one and only framework of political analysis. World events rendered this view untenable after World War I, first, because the Russian revolution opened the era of dictatorships and these seemed to become an established feature of the modern world and, second, because, increasingly from the 1950s, forms of government of a 'non-' or 'a-constitutional' kind were starting to prevail in the 'developing world', with populism, charismatic rule, often based on military power, being by far more common than constitutional practices.

A rethinking had therefore to take place in the 1950s. Was the subject to be forced to abandon its earlier deductive character and become essentially descriptive, with perhaps a modicum of generalizations based on induction? Not surprisingly, there was some longing for a return to what could be regarded as a 'purer' form of analysis. Comparative politics thus went THEN through a soul-searching effort designed in part to re-introduce an overall framework in a world in which there seemed no longer to be a case for such a single mode of analysis. Time was to show, however, that no overall framework was satisfactory. As a result, comparative politics has come to be based NOW on a more realistic combination of (very) 'partial' deductive theory in some domains and on induction in most others. Far from being reduced, its 'special' character has thus been strengthened in the last decades of the twentieth century.

**THEN: Attempting to Find a New Basis for Comparative Politics after World War II**

In an often quoted volume published in 1955, Macridis stated, summarizing what he saw the situation ‘THEN’ to be, somewhat overpessimistically perhaps: ‘Comparative study has thus far been comparative in name only’. He then went on to say that what he regarded as the traditional approach was ‘non-comparative’, ‘essentially descriptive’, ‘parochial’ (based on Western countries only), ‘static’, and ‘monographic’. Moreover, under the criticism that the bulk of the work was descriptive, it was stated that the analysis was historical or legalistic, and therefore rather narrow.¹

Two years earlier, Easton, in his *Political System*, voiced even stronger criticisms in relation to political science in general. He asserted that, ‘In political science there has been little deliberate effort to formulate a conceptual framework for the whole field’. And he added, ‘While it is not easy to explain why political science has been reluctant to inquire into such theory, there stands out at least one reason of consequence: the conception of science prevalent in political research over the last fifty years [i.e. since the beginning of the twentieth century] has deflected attention from theory’.² One of the crucial reasons for

¹ Macridis, *The Study of Comparative Government*, pp. 7–12.
² Easton, *The Political System*, p. 65.
this state of affairs, according to Easton, was 'hyperfactualism', another being 'a premature policy science' approach. Easton quoted Bryce, from the preface to Modern Democracies: '...it is facts that are needed. Facts, Facts, Facts. When facts have been supplied, each of us can try to reason from them'. He went on to conclude: 'In the training of political scientists, this theoretical malnutrition and surfeit of facts has serious consequences for the maturation of political science as a discipline. It has concealed from students of political life the need to view the political system as a whole and it has deprived them of the analytical tools necessary for such a task.' Easton was not concerned with comparative politics in particular. His aim was to overcome the specificity of that branch of the subject by elaborating a general framework for the 'political system' based on inputs, outputs, and a 'black box'.

More than those of Easton, Macridis' criticisms were exaggerated as, while there was little 'theory', there was some truly comparative work. Some administrative studies, notably Simon's Administrative Behaviour, published in 1947, did have a truly general character, but they were rather exceptional and almost entirely limited to that field. On the other hand, a substantial number of works of comparative politics went beyond the 'non-comparative', 'monographic' level. Such were Wheare's Federal Government, published in 1946, H. Finer's Theory and Practice of Modern Government, published in 1949, Duverger's Political Parties, published in 1950, or Deutsch's Nationalism and Social Communication, published in 1953. Duverger's study in particular was to become a classic on political parties, often criticized perhaps, but always referred to. These comparative politics studies had a marked empirical bent: they were in the tradition of Bryce and Lowell rather than in that of the 'classics'. Works of this kind began even in subsequent years to open up new aspects of the subject. Thus Huntington's The Soldier and the State, published in 1957, was one of the first general works on the military; Ehrman's Interest Groups in Four Continents, published in 1958, was the first and for a long time the only truly wide-ranging study of these organizations; Lipset's Political Man, published in 1959, looked at political behaviour and at regime stability in both Western Europe and Latin America. These studies were neither 'monographic' nor 'essentially descriptive' (while many others were, admittedly), but they were based on induction rather than on deduction and were therefore 'a-theoretical' in the Eastonian sense.

Meanwhile, the concerns voiced by Easton had given rise to two entirely different answers in two works which appeared at a very short interval of time from each other. One was Downs' An Economic Theory of Democracy, published in 1957. This was a middle-range deductive study, arguably the first to appear in the area of electoral behaviour, despite the claim made by Duverger that something approaching a 'law' of social science had been discovered by him concerning the relationship between electoral systems and party systems. While not dealing with detailed country analyses of voting behaviour, Downs' volume was a work of comparative politics in a deeper sense: the reasoning and the conclusions were universal. That study seemed therefore to bring comparative politics back into the fold of general political analysis, although this was not the case. The 'middle-range', not at the global level, as the book was concerned with one aspect of political life only. It was deliberately limited in scope; it was neither

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‘flag-flying’ nor ‘programmatic’, as Easton’s call had been, but it began to move political analysis in the direction of ‘rational choice’, having shown by example that a ‘problem’ could be treated deductively and with elegance and simplicity. Downs thus was the first economist to have a major impact on the way political analysis was to be conducted. He was quickly to be followed by other economists, while also being an inspiration to a growing number of political scientists. As early as 1962, two major works in this vein were published, Riker’s *Theory of Political Coalitions* and Buchanan and Tullock’s *Calculus of Consent*.

Easton’s goals had been different. He wanted the development of a global, overarching model in the manner of ‘grand’ sociological theory. His call was to be heard. In 1960, after having published articles going in that direction, Almond edited with Coleman *The Politics of the Developing Areas* which was directly inspired by Easton. For a moment at least, it seemed that a breakthrough had taken place. By elaborating concepts such as interest articulation, interest aggregation, rule-making, etc. and placing them within the context of a general structural-functional framework, the work appeared to forge a link, independently from legal or constitutional arrangements, between the various elements (institutional and behavioural) of political systems. Although it did not develop a theory in the full sense of the word, it presented a general model which seemed universally applicable.

The direct and positive impact of *The Politics of the Developing Areas* was to be relatively short-lived and somewhat limited: the panorama of comparative politics was not transformed. The publication of that study did not stop the publication of monographs and of inductive middle-range analyses, quite the contrary. For instance, several works on the military in both the Western and the developing worlds appeared at the time, in the vein of Huntington’s earlier volume, in particular Janowitz’s *The Professional Soldier*, published in 1960, and S. E. Finer’s *The Man on Horseback*, published in 1962. Indeed, Almond and Verba themselves followed the same trend when they published *The Civil Culture* in 1963. More ominously for Almond and Coleman’s work, other general models began to appear, in direct competition with the structural-functional approach: as early as 1963, Deutsch published *The Nerves of Government*, a volume which was inspired by Wiener’s work on communication.

That other models should have quickly appeared is not surprising, since major criticisms were levelled at the 1960 text almost as soon as it was published. Almond did indeed modify his framework between 1960 and 1966, in part probably to meet some of these criticisms, but the effect was only to render that framework inordinately complex. Objections were typically made on the grounds that the approach was ‘static’ and ‘Western-orientated’. In reality, the key difficulty was that it was not operational; ‘articulation’ or ‘aggregation’, for instance, were abstract and rather vague concepts which could not become empirical indicators. Yet, the Almond and Coleman volume had pushed comparative political analysis in a profoundly different direction and was therefore the source of much debate. Although neither their own scheme nor any other was to provide ‘the’ solution which some were expecting at the time, it was no small achievement on the part of Almond and Coleman, as well as of Easton, to have bravely proposed a global framework for comparative politics at a time when it seemed impossible to bring under one umbrella analyses relating to Western liberal democracies, Communist countries, and the developing world.
NOW: Induction and Deduction in a Middle-range Context at the End of the Twentieth Century

The enterprise did not succeed, however, as is shown by the fact that, four decades later, comparative politics remained a 'special' branch of politics and that it thrives almost exclusively at the middle-range. Global frameworks gradually lost ground, as one after the other proved unable to account for 'human nature in politics'. Structural-functionalism may have been static and Western-orientated, but it was at least concerned with 'real-world' institutions such as groups, parties, legislatures, governments, bureaucracies, and courts. Under severe criticisms, its influence receded: yet the models which superseded it, especially the developmental models, may have been more dynamic and, in their 'dependency' form, non-Western orientated, but they were unable to assess, indeed to an extent were even unwilling to pay much attention to, political structures and to patterns of political behaviour. In reality, the proponents of dependency models regarded as very limited the influence of what is usually considered to be the political domain, whether political institutions or political actors. Their criticisms of structural-functionalism may have been valid, but developmental theories did not provide a better mechanism to bring political life under a common umbrella.

Thus the belief in global models gradually declined and comparative politics came increasingly to concentrate on the middle-range. What remained at the 'global' level were no longer frameworks but approaches primarily designed to indicate how middle-range studies could best be undertaken. Two of these approaches, distinct and even to a large extent opposed to each other, have come to dominate the scene.

One is the 'new institutionalism'. This has been said to have helped 'to bring the state back in', as well indeed as the other political structures which developmentalist models had tended to neglect. The claim is somewhat exaggerated, as institutions had never been set aside except by the supporters of developmental theories: the 'new institutionalism' is thus more directed at proponents of these theories, few of whom were political scientists, than at the bulk of the comparative politics specialists. While thus emphasizing the role of structures, the 'new institutionalism' stops short of suggesting a framework within which institutions might relate to each other, as structural-functionalism had done; its main aim is to stress the importance of institutions. This is not controversial, unless it is suggested that institutions 'make' politics, a conclusion apparently reached by some. In general, however, the 'new institutionalism' does not go beyond stating that institutions provide the stage within which politics takes place. There is no attempt to specify how particular types of institutional configurations emerge, let alone to account for the ways in which institutions interact within these configurations. As a result, the 'new institutionalism' cannot be described as a 'deductive' 'global model'. It suggests a direction of research and, in this capacity, it has played and will continue to play a key part in insisting that those who are concerned with the analysis of politics concentrate their attention on structures and attempt to discover the role of these structures and the way they interrelate.

The other approach which has dominated political analysis in the closing years of the twentieth century, rational choice, is fundamentally different: while the 'new institutionalism' has sociological origins, rational choice is drawn from
economics. Given the rigour which it has introduced in a number of fields of comparative political analysis, such as voting behaviour or governmental coalition-building, rational choice has come to be regarded by some as potentially able to provide guidelines in all domains. Yet, as the 'new institutionalism', it does not provide a framework within which to analyse politics in a global manner; besides, it encounters major difficulties with respect to institutions, which it can take account of as constraints but not as mechanisms which socialize and thus fashion political behaviour over generations. Since, moreover, what is to be considered 'rational' is in many cases far from clear, the approach is unlikely to provide more than important but partial guidelines for the understanding of the substantive aspects of comparative politics.

Not surprisingly, therefore, induction remains, NOW, the main way in which comparative politics continues to progress. That research approach received a major boost from the growth of public policy studies since the 1980s, as efforts came to be made to move at least somewhat beyond detailed case-studies. While the public policy field can be criticized more justifiably than any other for its 'hyperfactualism', it is not surprising that there should have been a heavy emphasis on the detailed examination of the events leading to decisions. If generalizations are to account for, rather than float above, reality, induction is the most appropriate approach as it makes it possible for the richness of that reality to be reflected in these generalizations.

As a matter of fact, even studies based on rational choice have been 'tainted' by induction, so to speak, as they have been drawn to distinguish among different situations, different countries, or different periods. Downs' work avoided the problem as it was based on a highly simplified set of assumptions. Political scientists in general and comparative political scientists in particular are rarely willing to simplify assumptions to that extent, either because they believe that only if situations are looked at in their complexity can new knowledge be acquired or because they find it difficult, even impossible, to extract a simple core from an intrinsically complex reality.

There is thus a trend towards what might be described as a mixed deductive-inductive approach in studies devoted to governmental coalition-building processes and to patterns of governmental duration, for instance: more and more variables being gradually introduced to ensure that these studies are better able to account for the diversity of the reality, the deductive approach is associated to and indeed brought in to help to examine what are sometimes individual cases only. The deductive approach based on rational choice has also been combined with induction in many studies of political regimes, for instance in the analyses of parliamentary or presidential systems, as is exemplified by the works of Lipshart or of Shugart and Carey. Rarely is there 'pure' deductive analysis in comparative politics: more frequently rational choice is used to analyse political phenomena which a process of induction has helped in the first instance to identify. The 'exception' which comparative politics has constituted throughout the second half of the twentieth century has thus not disappeared; it has not even been reduced: it has been reinforced.

Conclusion

Several decades after a major effort was made to encompass the 'facts' of comparative politics in a global model, induction based on these facts remains

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the main mechanism by which comparative politics has come to be developed. Far from being obsolete or unnecessary, comparative politics has 'grown and multiplied'. The peculiarities of different systems, of different countries, of different institutions, of different practices are increasingly explored, not treated as trivial. Tocqueville has won, not the constitutional lawyers or the grand theorists.

Thus the question raised by Holt and Turner in 1970 is highly relevant. Why is comparative politics not being 'absorbed' into general politics? Why is it not a mere method, as 'should' be the case if political science was a 'normal' social science? What are the characteristics of political activity which force analyses to remain idiosyncratic despite many efforts, over many decades, to undermine and even abolish this idiosyncrasy?

The answer to such a basic question has undoubtedly many facets. At least one key aspect of the problem emerges as one reflects on the fact that two highly different approaches, two different philosophies, almost, rational choice and the 'new institutionalism', are regarded as likely to provide guidance for the development of comparative politics. Rational choice stresses the importance of actors, of their strategies, of their personalities. The 'new institutionalism' insists on the point that structures are 'facts' and cannot be ignored. Indeed, comparative politics does not have only to take actors and institutions into account, it must also look at the reciprocal influence which these two elements have on each other.

Comparative politics is thus 'special'. In economics, in sociology, in psychology, numbers are sufficiently large, situations sufficiently similar, actors sufficiently interchangeable, for general analyses to be valid, at any rate so long as these economists, sociologists, or psychologists operate within the confines of a single culture; but political scientists cannot remain within the confines of a single culture if they wish to determine the role of actors and of institutions. In each country, there may be one key actor or at most very few; there may be one institution of a particular kind or at most very few. These are typically big 'rocks' in the landscape of political life. Actors and institutions have therefore to be considered in a comparative framework, but a framework which also takes into account the idiosyncrasies of these actors and of these institutions, as these idiosyncrasies may have as great an impact on political life as the similarities which can be found. It is understandable that, THEN, when comparative politics was being reconstructed, there should have been a hope to bring that part of the discipline under the umbrella of a global scheme; but it is even more understandable that it should be felt more prudent NOW to draw conclusions only after careful fact-finding efforts have taken place and to use induction to keep close to these facts even when generalizing.

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8 This characteristic of economics is valid in general, except perhaps when that discipline assesses the role of very large corporations and of their leaders, but it is then looking at political rather than at economic activity.

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