

## Major Characteristics of the Traditional Approach

### Essentially Descriptive

- 1 A brief account of the characteristics of the traditional approach and emphasis in the comparative study of government will reveal the source of the current dissatisfaction and will point to the need for reorientation. Comparative study has thus far been comparative in name only. It has been part of what may loosely be called the study of foreign governments, in which the governmental structures and the formal organization of state institutions were treated in a descriptive, historical, or legalistic manner. Primary emphasis has been placed on written documents like constitutions and the legal prescriptions for the allocation of political power. Finally, studies of foreign governments were largely addressed to the Western European democracies or to the political systems of Western Europe, Great Britain, and the Dominions.
- 2 It may be worthwhile to discuss briefly each of these characteristics of the traditional approach.

### Essentially Noncomparative

- 3 The vast majority of publications in the field of comparative government deal either with one country or with parallel descriptions of the institutions of a number of countries. The majority of texts illustrate this approach. The student is led through the constitutional foundations, the organization of political power, and a description of the ways in which such powers are exercised. In each case "problem areas" are discussed with reference to the country's institutional structure. The right of dissolution is often cited to explain political instability in France, and, conversely, political stability in England is discussed with reference to the prerogatives of the Crown, with particular emphasis, of course, on the Prime Minister's power of dissolution. The interest of the student is concentrated primarily on an analysis of the structure of the state, the location of sovereignty, the electoral provisions, and the distribution of the electorate into political parties whose ideologies and programs are described. This approach will be found in any standard text and in a number of monographs which aspire to be more comparative in character.<sup>1</sup>

From *The Study of Comparative Politics* (New York, Random House, 1955), pp. 7-14. Reprinted by permission.

It may well be argued that description of the formal political institutions is vital for the understanding of the political process and that as such it leads to comparative study. If so, we hardly ever have any comparison between the particular institutions described. A reading, for instance, of one of the best texts, *Governments of Continental Europe*, edited by James T. Shotwell, will reveal that as we pass from France to Italy, Switzerland, Germany, and the U.S.S.R. there is no common thread, no criterion of why these particular countries were selected and no examination of the factors that account for similarities and differences. The same generally applies to Frederick Ogg's and Harold Zink's *Modern Foreign Governments*, and to Fritz M. Marx's *Foreign Governments*. In a somewhat different fashion John Ranney's and Gwendolen Carter's *Major Foreign Powers* has the virtue of addressing itself to only four political systems and of discussing them with reference to some basic problem areas, but again the connecting link and the criterion of selection are missing. Another pioneer book in the field, Daniel Witt's *Comparative Political Institutions*, abandons the country-by-country approach in favor of categories within which comparison is more feasible, but the author is satisfied to include under such categories as "The Citizen and the Government" and "The Electoral Process" separate descriptions of the institutions of individual countries, and fails to make explicit comparisons.

It should be clearly understood here that these remarks are not meant to reflect on the scholarly quality of the books cited, nor to disparage the descriptive approach. They are meant merely to point out that these books are limited primarily to political morphology or what might also be called political anatomy. They describe various political institutions generally without attempting to compare them; what comparison is made is limited exclusively to the identification of differences between types or systems, such as federal versus unitary system or parliamentary versus presidential system or the more elusive differences between democratic and totalitarian systems.

There are two typical approaches in the descriptive study of political institutions. The first is historical and the second is legalistic. The historical approach centers on the study of the origins and growth of certain institutions. We trace the origins of the British parliamentary system to Magna Carta and study its development through successive historical stages. It

is assumed that parallel historical accounts of the evolution of the French parliament or the German representative assemblies will indicate similarities and differences. The approach followed is almost identical with that used by the historian. There is no effort to evolve an analytical scheme within which an antecedent factor is related in terms other than chronological to a particular event or development.<sup>2</sup>

7 The second most prevalent approach is what we might call the legalistic approach. Here the student is exposed primarily to the study of the "powers" of the various branches of government and of their relationships with reference to the existing constitutional and legal prescriptions. This is almost exclusively the study of what can be done or what cannot be done by various governmental agencies with reference to legal and constitutional provisions. Again, this approach, like its historical counterpart with which it often goes hand in hand, describes the political system in a very narrow frame. It does not seek the forces that shape the legal forms, nor does it attempt to establish the causal relationships that account for the variety in constitutional prescriptions from one system to another or from one period to another. A typical illustration of this approach are two recent studies on post-World War II constitutional developments in Western Europe: Arnold Zurcher's *Constitutionalism and Constitutional Trends Since World War II*, and Mirkin Guetzevitch's *Les Constitutions Européennes*. To a great extent Ivor Jennings's works on the British Cabinet and the British Parliament rely on the legalistic approach with particular emphasis on the search for precedents that "explain" the powers of various governmental organs.

8 The combination of the historical and the legalistic approaches is found in the great majority of books published on foreign systems that purport to be comparative. Despite the fact that they give us a camerallike picture of the development and the relationships of the various political organs in a system, and point to parallel historical development, they do not attempt to devise a general frame of reference in which we can get broad hypotheses about the development and operation of institutions.

### Essentially Parochial

9 The great number of studies on foreign political systems has been addressed to the examination of Western European institutions. Accessibility of the countries studied, relative ease

of overcoming language barriers, and the availability of official documents and other source materials, as well as cultural affinities, account for this fact. France, Great Britain, Germany, Switzerland, and to a lesser extent the Scandinavian countries and the British Dominions have been the countries to which writing and research has been directed and which are being included in the various comparative government courses in the greater number of American universities. Again, however, no systematic effort has been made to identify the similarities and the differences among these countries except in purely descriptive terms. No effort has been made to define in analytical terms the categories that constitute an "area" of study. True, most authors seem to identify these countries in terms of a common historical and cultural background and they often pay lip service to some other common traits, such as their advanced economic systems, parliamentary institutions, and democracy. What is meant by "advanced" economic systems, however, and, more specifically, what is the relationship between political institutions and the existing economic system? We often find the statement that Germany did not develop a democratic ideology and parliamentary institutions because capitalism developed "late," but no effort is being made to test the validity of such a generalization comparatively—for, after all, capitalism developed "late" in the United States and in some of the British Dominions. Often statements about the existence of a common ideology are made without attempting to define what is "common" and how ideology is related to political institutions.<sup>3</sup>

There is no doubt that references to social and economic configurations, political ideologies, and institutions that can be found in texts should be interrelated into a system that would make comparative analyses of these Western European countries possible. No such effort, however, with the exception of Carl Friedrich's *Constitutional Government and Democracy*, has been made, and even Professor Friedrich is concerned only with the interplay between ideology and institutions. There is no systematic synthesis of the various "characteristics" or "traits" of different political systems. Yet without such a conceptualization no variables can be identified and compared, and as a result no truly comparative analyses of the Western governmental systems have been made by political scientists.

Some notable exceptions, in addition to Professor Friedrich's and Professor Herman Finer's books, are Michels's book on *Political Parties*<sup>4</sup> and the recent comparative analysis of the structure and the organization of political parties and the re-

relationship between structure and ideology by Professor Maurice Duverger.<sup>5</sup> Another good illustration of a more sophisticated study is a current essay on the French political system by François Goguel<sup>6</sup> in which he points out that political, economic, and social instability in France is due to the uneven development of various regions in the country, thus suggesting a relationship between political stability and uniformity of economic development within a country.

- 12 Concentration on Western systems cannot be exclusively attributed to some of the considerations suggested above. An even more important factor was the belief at one time shared by many political scientists that democracy was the "normal" and durable form of government and that it was destined to spread throughout the world. In fact, "comparative study" would embrace more political systems only as they developed democratic institutions. James Bryce put this in very succinct terms:

The time seems to have arrived when the actualities of democratic government in its diverse forms, should be investigated, and when the conditions most favorable to its success should receive more attention than students, as distinguished from politicians, have been bestowing upon them.<sup>7</sup>

- 13 It was natural that such a point of view should limit comparative study to the democratic systems and that it would call for the study of other systems only for the purpose of identifying democratic institutions and forms. As we shall see, such a preoccupation distorted the analysis and study of non-Western systems by centering upon patterns and institutions that were familiar to the Western observer, such as constitutions and legislatures, but whose relevance to the political processes of non-Western countries was only incidental.

### Essentially Static

- 14 In general the traditional approach has ignored the dynamic factors that account for growth and change. It has concentrated on what we have called political anatomy. After the evolutionary premises of some of the original works in the nineteenth century were abandoned, students of political institutions apparently lost all interest in the formulation of other theories in the light of which change could be comparatively studied.
- 15 The question of sovereignty and its location occupied students of politics for a long time; the study of constitutional

structures became a favorite pastime, though no particular effort was made to evaluate the effectiveness of constitutional forms in achieving posited goals or to analyze the conditions underlying the success or failure of constitutionalism. The parallel development of administration was noted, but again its growth was studied with reference to a constitutional setting, as Dicey's work amply illustrates.<sup>8</sup> The growth of political parties was studied, but aside from descriptions of their legal status little consideration was given by political scientists to the radical transformation parties were to bring about in the organization of political power. Henry Maine's and William Lecky's<sup>9</sup> bold hypotheses about the impact on democracy of the development of party government and of the extension of the franchise were abandoned in the light of contrary evidence and were never replaced with new ones. Indeed, Walter Bagehot's<sup>10</sup> analysis of the British Cabinet remained standard until the turn of the century, though the word "party" rarely appears in it, and Dicey's formal statement of the limitations of parliamentary sovereignty were considered for a long time to be the most definitive formulation of the problem.<sup>11</sup> The British people, it was pointed out by Dicey, constituting the "political sovereign" body limited the "legal sovereignty" of the Parliament and such limitation was institutionalized through the courts. Federalism and its development in the various dominions was also discussed with reference to the legal organization of power and to its relationship with the concept of sovereignty. In all cases the studies made were a dissection of the distribution of the powers in terms of their legal setting and left out of the picture altogether the problem of change and the study of those factors—political or other—that account for change.

### Essentially Monographic

The most important studies of foreign systems, aside from 16 basic texts, have taken the form of monographs that have concentrated on the study of the political institutions of one system or on the discussion of a particular institution in one system. Works such as those by John Marriot, Arthur K. Keith, Joseph Barthelemy, James Bryce, Ivor Jennings, Harold Laski, A. V. Dicey, Frank Goodnow, W. A. Robson, Abbott L. Lowells, Woodrow Wilson,<sup>12</sup> and many others were addressed generally to only one country or to a particular institutional development within one country. The American presidency, the British parliamentary system, the congressional form of gov-

ernment were presented in studies in which the particular institutional forms were placed in the context of the whole tradition and legal system of the country involved. Sometimes such monographs represented great advances over the legalistic approach because they brought into the open nonpolitical factors and institutions or attempted to deal analytically with some of the problems facing the democratic systems. They had a focal point and the description of the institutions was always related to a common theme or was undertaken in the light of a common political problem, such as the relationship between executive and legislature, the growth of administrative law and the institutions of administration, the relationship between national characteristics and political ideology, and the like. The relationships established between political and non-political factors, however, hardly attain a systematic formulation that can be used for comparative study, i.e., for identifying variables and attempting to account for them. Nor is the suggestion ever explicitly made that the particular way in which a problem is studied or certain institutional developments discussed is applicable to parallel phenomena in other countries.

### The Problem Approach in the Traditional Literature

- 17 A number of studies dealing with problem areas have employed the traditional approach. Examples are studies of the relationship between democracy and economic planning; of representation and the growth of administrative agencies with new economic and social functions; of the decay of bicameralism; or of the efforts of representative assemblies to reconcile the social and economic conflicts arising in democratic societies between the two world wars.
- 18 Such studies have usually been confined to the institutional framework of the country involved. Analyses of policy-orientation have not gone beyond the examination of reforms of the formal institutional structure, as in studies of the reorganization of the House of Lords, the development of functional representative assemblies, the establishment of economic federalism, the delegation of legislative powers to the executive, the association of professional groups in policy-making, the integration rather than separation of policy-making organs, and, finally, measures to combat the growth of antidemocratic parties within democratic systems. The study of such problems has paved the way, however, for the abandonment of the traditional formal categories, for these problems cannot be ex-

amined in that restricting frame. They call for the development of a more precise analysis of human behavior and of the relationship between political institutions and social and economic factors. They call for an approach in which politics is conceived as a process that cannot be understood without reference to the contextual factors of a political system.

### The Area Focus

Only recently has the study of foreign systems been cast in a frame that carries more promise for comparative analysis. Partly as the result of the war and the need to acquire better knowledge about certain geographic areas, and partly as the result of the intensive and more systematic study by sociologists and anthropologists of human behavior in various non-Western countries, political scientists have become involved in interdisciplinary studies of "areas." An area is a cluster of countries which, because of certain policy preoccupations, geographic propinquity, or common problems and theoretic interests, can be studied as a unit. The political and economic systems, languages, history, culture, and psychology are jointly explored by representatives of various disciplines in universities and government departments. Area studies have developed rapidly in the United States in the last fifteen years. Every big university now has a number of such programs ranging from Western Europe to the Middle East and Africa.<sup>13</sup>

On its face the so-called area programs provide what many students of comparative government consider to be the best laboratory for comparative analysis. For it has been assumed that an area is a cluster of countries in which there is enough cultural uniformity to make the comparative study of political institutional variables between them possible. Furthermore, it has also been assumed that the interdisciplinary approach provides for a more sophisticated and systematic analysis in which the investigator or group of investigators can gain a "total" picture of the system and subsequently be able to dissect it and compare its component elements.

The interdisciplinary approach has suggested some important organizational concepts on the basis of which data could be gathered, variables identified, and comparative study undertaken. Most important among them have been the concepts of *culture* and *personality*. The former stresses the particular traits that constitute the configuration of a culture.<sup>14</sup> Culture-traits or culture-patterns can be identified and compared with

each other. Yet in most cases comparison here, even among anthropologists, has assumed primarily the character of pointing out differences rather than explaining them. The *personality* concept on the other hand, by pointing out various personality traits or patterns, provides an instrument for the study of motivational aspects and their variations from one culture to another.<sup>15</sup>

- 22 It is difficult to assess the contributions of the area approach to the comparative study of politics. Very often, instead of suggesting a systematic analytical frame within which political scientists might attempt intracultural comparisons, the area approach has degenerated into either a descriptive analysis of institutional political structures within the given areas or merely produced monographs in which certain problems were studied with more sophistication with reference to one country. Such books as Robert Scalapino's *Democracy and the Party Movement in Pre-War Japan*, Barrington Moore's *Soviet Politics, the Dilemma of Power*, Alex Inkeles's *Public Opinion in the Soviet Union*, George Blanksten's *Peron's Argentina*, and Merle Fainsod's *How Russia Is Ruled* are the best representative works in area studies, but their excellence lies not so much in their systematic orientation or in the development of analytical concepts for comparison but rather in the sophistication with which the authors relate the political process in the system discussed to the ideological, cultural, and social contextual elements. Institutions are no longer described as if they had a reality which is taken for granted but rather as functioning entities operating within a given context. The descriptive approach gained as a result a richness and flavor which could not be found in the traditional legalistic and historical approach.
- 23 But in general, the area approach with its interdisciplinary orientation has failed to provide us with a systematic frame for comparative analysis. For, after all, the very definition of an area is subject to methodological questions with which many of the area specialists never grapple. An area is not a concrete reality as has often been asserted or taken for granted on the basis of considerations of policy or expediency. It is, or rather ought to be, an analytical concept which subsumes certain categories for the compilation of data, provides for certain uniformities which suggest a control situation of the laboratory type within which variables can be studied. Area programs, however, have not attained this level of systematic orientation and as a result their contributions to comparative analysis has been limited. They have enriched our awareness of cultures

and institutions in which the political forms vary greatly from the Western forms and they have been suggestive, at least to the political scientist, of the need to broaden his horizon and include in his study of formal institutions many of the informal processes of a system.

#### Notes

1. See for instance some of the best texts: James T. Shotwell (ed.): *Governments of Continental Europe*, New York, The Macmillan Co., 1950; Taylor Cole (ed.): *European Political Systems*, New York, Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1953; Gwendolen Carter, John Ranney and John Hertz: *Major Foreign Powers*, New York, Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1952; Frederic Ogg and Harold Zink: *Modern Foreign Governments*, New York, The Macmillan Co., 1953.
2. Some of the best illustrations of this approach are David Thomson: *Democracy in France*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1952; A. Soulier: *L'Instabilité Ministerielle*, Paris, Sirey, 1939; François Goguel: *La Politique des Partis sous la Troisième République*, Paris, Aux Editions du Seuil, 1946.
3. T. D. Weldon: *The Vocabulary of Politics*, London, Pelican, 1953.
4. Herman Finer: *The Theory and Practice of Modern Government*, New York, Henry Holt and Co., 1949; Robert Michels: *Political Parties: A Sociological Study of the Oligarchic Tendencies of Modern Democracies*, New York, Heart's International Library Co., 1915.
5. Maurice Duverger: *Les Partis Politiques*, Paris, Colin, 1951; and the excellent review articles of Samuel H. Beer: "Les Partis Politiques," *The Western Political Quarterly* 6: 512-17 (Sept. 1953) and Sigmund Neumann: "Toward a Theory of Political Parties," *World Politics* 6:549-63 (July 1954).
6. François Goguel: "Political Instability in France," *Foreign Affairs* 33: 111-22 (Oct. 1954).
7. James Bryce: *Modern Democracies*, New York, The Macmillan Co., 1921. Vol. I, p.4.
8. A. V. Dicey: *The Law of the Constitution*, New York, The Macmillan Co., 1902.
9. Henry Maine: *Popular Government*, London, T. Murray, 1890, and William Lecky: *Democracy and Liberty*, London, Longmans, Green and Co., 1896.
10. Walter Bagehot: *The English Constitution*, London, Oxford University Press, 1936.
11. Dicey, *op. cit.*
12. See John Marriott: *English Political Institutions*. Oxford, The Clarendon Press, 1910, *The Mechanics of the Modern State*, Oxford, The Clarendon Press, 1927, *Second Chambers*, Oxford, The Clarendon Press, 1910; Abbot L. Lowell: *The Government of England*, New York, The Macmillan Co., 1908, *Governments and Parties in Continental Europe*, Boston and New York, Houghton Mifflin and Co., 1897, *Greater European Governments*, Cambridge, Harvard

- University Press, 1918; Joseph Barthelemy: *Le Role du Puvoir Executif dans les republiques modernes*, Paris, Giard et Briere, 1906, *Le Gouvernement de la France*, Paris, Payot, 1925; Woodrow Wilson: *Congressional Government*, Boston and New York, Houghton Mifflin and Co., 1913, *Congressional Government in the United States*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1913; Arthur B. Keith: *The British Cabinet System* (2nd ed.), London, Stevens and Sons, Ltd., 1952; Frank Goodnow: *Comparative Administrative Law*, New York and London, G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1893, *Politics and Administration*, New York, The Macmillan Co., 1900; W. A. Robson: *Justice and Administrative Law* (2nd ed.), London, Stevens and Sons, Ltd., 1947; Ivor Jennings: *Cabinet Government*, New York, The Macmillan Co., 1936 *Parliament*, New York, The Macmillan Co., 1940; James Bryce: *Modern Democracies*, New York, The Macmillan Co., 1921.
13. W. C. Bennet: *Area Studies in American Universities*, New York, Social Science Research Council, 1951.
  14. Ruth Benedict: *Patterns of Culture*, Boston and New York, Houghton Mifflin and Co., 1934; Melville Herskovits: *Man and His Works*, New York, Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1951 Clyde Kluckhohn: *The Mirror for Man*, New York, Whittlesey House, 1949.
  15. Some of the most illustrative works are: Theodore Adorno and others: *The Authoritarian Personality*, New York, Harper & Brothers, 1950; Gabriel Almond: *The Appeal of Communism*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1954; David Levy: *New Fields of Psychiatry*, New York, W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1947. See also the excellent review article by Raymond Bauer: "The Psycho-Cultural Approach to Soviet Studies," *World Politics* 7:119-32 (Oct. 1954).