

TEACHING AND RESEARCH IN THE FIELD OF COMPARATIVE GOVERNMENT

Prof. Manfred C. VERNON

Fulbright Professor,
University of Ankara

In a period, when we call our world a shrinking one, when many new states are created and when countries such as Turkey, or a few years back France, have been concerned with the writing of a new constitution, the need for the study of foreign governments seems to be obvious. Actually, the study of comparative government is probably as old as political writing; Aristotle showed an interest in comparison, as is evidenced by his *politics*. Indeed, «medieval authors, while less eclectic in their approach, yet attempted to bring in as much comparison as was possible under the circumstances; and in the seventeenth century comparisons of different types of government appeared practically in every page of political philosophy.» (1)

If we want to define the term «comparative government» in the broadest sense, we might propose the vague formula: It is an attempt to survey preferably the whole apparatus of different governments in one single work or course. The purpose of this undertaking seems to be that we look for comparable similarities or that we desire to point out the uniqueness of a specific institution or pattern of governmental expression. For these reasons it is often surveyed «subject by subject» rather than «country by country.» Professor Herman Finer has defined this as follows: «... each set of institutions is taken for all countries together. That is, it is truly comparative, and this affords the basis for sound generalization.» It was felt by him, as well as by others, that this should probably mean a loss of the all-dimensional, relative sense, «but this was to be more than compensated by «the great gain of analysis and immediate comparison,» for a «clearer revelation of the uniformities of human nature is government.» (2)

(1) Gunnar Heckscher, *The Study of Comparative Government and Politics* (New York: MacMillan, 1957) p. 13.

(2) Herman Finer, *The Theory and Practice of Modern Government* (New York: Dial Press, 1934) p. XIV f.

It is interesting to note that many years after he made these statements, Professor Finer has changed his approach and in his most recent work *The Major Governments of Europe* now uses the «country by country» approach. In the preface to the new publication, Professor Finer points out that while his former method had «the advantage that it leads quickly into the key problems and enables keen comparison,» it has also distinct disadvantages. He is now particularly impressed with the fact that his former method «has the disadvantage of disintegrating the supreme political entity, the nation.»

«The present method is designed to overcome that failing: to show that political institutions cling together in a national configuration, a national whole, a coherence. Furthermore, the coherent systems have been developed in their peculiar form and manner of operation over many centuries of cultural evolution in time and place, by personalities and accident, the cultures including all the multitudinous elements and nuances of their geography, history, anthropology, etc. The nation-by-nation method enables these forces to be revealed, and it is helpful to prediction, because of their articulated effect.» 3)

This significant change in the academic approach of one of the most distinguished authors in the field of Comparative Government seems to be indicative of the recognition, shared by many others, that comparison should not be the beginning of academic inquiry and research. You ought to know the institutions and problems of individual countries before you can move to the second stage of finding out whether nations have things in common; only then analysis seems to be feasible and convincing. As Professor Heckscher has pointed out most assuringly: «It is known that [even] Aristotle prepared a number of studies of various governments before embarking on his *Politics*.» (4)

Actually, one can note, upon reading of the most modern texts using the country - by - country approach, that the most important ideas are obviously based on comparison. All texts seem to look in each country for the same institutions as well as specific phenomena. Described are always the typical and relatively easily comparable features of government, such as the executive, the legislature or the judiciary. There is

(3) Herman Finer, *The Major Governments of Modern Europe* (Evanston, Ill. : Row, Peterson and Co., 1960) p. vii. f. This book was preceded by a similar publication by Professor Finer, *Governments of Greater European Powers* «New York : Henry Holt and Co., 1956).

(4) Heckscher, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

also some elaborate information on national and local government, the principles of administration and justice, and, last not least, the field of civil liberties. Certain terms of identification are always used with some comparative suggestions. For instance, a reference to the concept of «parliamentary government» makes most students think of the British system to be the standard form of parliamentary government. But we also know that it has been imitated by other countries such as France, or The Netherlands, and modified and adjusted to their specific needs. (5)

Yet it appears to be an even more thrilling and certainly awarding experience to the scholar to find out about uniqueness and difference, or at least the local variation and refinement of an otherwise comparable institution. The United States will always be pointed out for having a «presidential form of government» and to be *the* country of the venerable institution, known as «judicial review.» There seems to be nothing more original than the country's constitutional emphasis on «separation of powers» and «checks and balances.» Furthermore, the American idea of federalism shows features of unique nature. Or take the many original manifestations of British Government, typical only for it. Think of the workings of Parliament, the relationship of the Cabinet to the House of Commons, and «His (or Her) Majesty's Loyal Opposition.» But above all, the amazing amount of political restraint and commonsense as well as other exclusively British expressions should be convincing examples in case. There is no doubt, however, that the student's realization of such uniqueness must be suggestive of his fine knowledge of the common and easily comparable facts.

In recent times, the problem of comparison and the techniques used have become subjects of controversy. The experts became largely concerned with the question of *what* should be compared and *how* it should be approached. An early report on this matter emanated from a meeting of a research panel and was published in 1944. (6) After World War II, largely under the impact of UNESCO, a meeting was organized by the

(5) Some interesting statements on this question and its developments in modern times can be found in the provocative article by Peter Campbell, «Some Aspects of Parliamentary Government in Europe» in *Parliamentary Affairs*, vol. XII, nos. 3 and 4 (Summer and Autumn 1959) pp. 405 ff.

(6) For detailed information see Karl Loewenstein, «Report on the Research Panel on Comparative Government» in *The American Political Science Review*, vol XXXVIII, (June, 1944) pp. 540 - 548.

International Political Science Association (IPSA) in 1952 and spent considerable time also on the question of comparative government. The findings resulted in a report by Professor William A. Robson, *The University Teaching of Political Science* (UNESCO, 1954). Due to the interest shown in the specific subject, IPSA organized a special international round-table on comparative government, which was held in Florence from April 5-10, 1954. More than fifty representatives from fourteen different countries produced 27 working papers. The final report on the conference was written by Professor Gunnar Heckscher. (7).

In the United States a small group of political scientists met in a Research Seminar on Comparative Politics, sponsored by the Social Science Research Council. It was held at Northwestern University in the Summer of 1952. The final report on the Seminar, entitled «Research in Comparative Politics» appeared subsequently in the *American Political Science Review*. (8) This group occupied itself mainly with the question of the methodological approach and orientation to research and teaching of comparative government. The participants pointed out that the old emphasis was strictly technical and far too legalistic, thus too traditional. Indeed, it was considered as «not only parochial [in its emphasis on Western systems] but also primarily descriptive and formulative» (9). In addition, this technique was described as being actually non-comparative, essentially static and monographic. (10) The panelists now proposed «to enter a new stage which reflects in essence the progressive systematic orientation in the study of politics. It is beginning to assume a central role in empirically oriented study.» (11).

The members of the group felt that in future a student «must resort to comparison - at different levels of abstraction and complexity - of wider or narrower segments of the political process.» Altogether, the new

(7) It is *The Study of Comparative Government and Politics*, mentioned in footnote 1. The papers presented at the conference appeared in *Studi Politici* (Florence, March - May, 1954).

(8) Vol. XLVII, no. 3 (September, 1953) pp. 641 ff. The Northwestern meeting was followed by a conference on the study of comparative politics in Princeton. This meeting led to the establishment of a Social Science Research Committee on Comparative Politics. Thoughts coinciding with the Northwestern meeting, but somewhat more detailed, can be found in the booklet written by one of its participants, Prof. Roy C. Macridis, *The Study of Comparative Government* (Garden City, N. Y., 1955).

(9) «Research on Comparative Politics» p. 641.

(10) See Macridis, *op. cit.*, *passim*.

(11) *Ibid.*, p. 3.

emphasis should lead to something to which the traditional inquiry has been insensitive, viz. to hypothesizing. This would be necessary in order «to increase the awareness of the need for taking some kind of methodological position prior to or along with the collection and descriptive enumeration of facts.» All that remains to be done is then to agree on a «scheme of inquiry, or upon alternative schemes of inquiry», through which it may be hoped «to elicit empirical research and investigation which will be systematically oriented to the major problems of the field.» For «comparison, it was agreed, must proceed on the basis of a definition which views politics as a universally discoverable social function or activity. The function of politics, in the total social system, is to provide society with social decisions having the force and status of legitimacy.» Obviously, in order to guarantee a chance of success, certain «criteria of relevance and interest» must exist and be made explicit. These criteria are needed so that one can determine what question should be asked about political systems and what hypotheses should be elaborated. The analyzing student should therefore concern himself with «general modes of politics» to include thorough investigation into political processes, which were defined as «struggles among power aspiration and policy aspiration groups competing for the status of legitimacy.» This was to be followed by an assessment of the outcome of the struggle and the end state, «legitimacy», the «political reflection of its general value system.» (12).

Professor Macridis, also a member of the Northwestern group, has pointed out in his own study that the study of comparative government should proceed in the following manner:

- «(1) the collection and description of facts on the basis of the discovery and description of facts on the basis of carefully constructed and generally adhered to classificatory schemes;
- (2) the discovery and description of uniformities and differences;
- (3) the formulations of interrelationships between component elements of the political process and other social phenomena in the form of tentative hypotheses;
- (4) the subsequent verification of such tentative hypotheses by rigorous empirical observation for purpose of amplifying the original hypotheses and ultimately verifying them; and finally
- (5) the slow cumulative process of 'acceptance' of certain basic propositions.» (13).

(12) See for more detail «Research on Comparative Politics» pp. 643, 648 ff.

(13) Macridis, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

The members of the Northwestern meeting suggested also other approaches like (a) the *problem approach* to comparative politics, (b) the *area approach* to the study of the field, and (c) an amplification of the so - called *classificatory scheme approach* in the form of a check - list to aid the student in the more coherent and more systematic compilation of data. In regard to the problem approach technique the participants of the Northwestern Seminar discussed three types. One was envisaged as a narrow - range theory, for which they considered as a feasible example «an analysis of the relations between the power of dissolution and ministerial stability in parliamentary systems.» The second area was to be concerned with a middle - range theory «to include problems of fairly general importance.» As an example was envisaged « a study of the political consequences of rapid industrialization in underdeveloped areas of the world.» Finally, there could be a concern with policy - oriented theory and problems. These were to deal with «the immediate practical solution of important problems», to be «consequently focused on problems derived from pressing conflict situations or any overwhelming need for action at the government level.» Some of the examples given were the following: How to deal with political instability in France?, or «what should the policy of constitutional regimes be toward the totalitarian parties, e. g., the Communist party?» (14)

As to the area approach the discussants felt that this specific category had been abused in the organization of university studies and been «somewhat indiscriminately associated» with concepts of geographic, historical, economic or cultural nature. Indeed the panel members stated that «neither geographic, historical, economic nor cultural similarities constituted prima facie evidence of the existence of similar political characteristics.» The political scientist, in need of specific criteria, should attempt to «define areas with reference to 'political traits' or 'trait complexes' or 'problem configuration patterns,' in terms analogous to those used by the anthropologists when they break down the concept of culture into 'traits' or 'trait complexes'. «The researcher would thus be confronted with problems like political instability and revolution», dictatorship, militarism, etc. Such breakdowns might very well become the basis for a new approach to areas like Latin America or the Middle East. There could be also other operational criteria, e. g. the interaction of values and ideas (culture), physical proximity, economic relations and others. (15)

(14) See for more detailed information «Research in Comparative Politics» pp. 651 - 652.

In regard to the classificatory scheme, the members of the Seminar came to the conclusion «that a political checklist may fill a very serious gap in the literature today». However, a detailed list of this kind would involve «an immense task» and therefore «such an undertaking re'quires a coperative effort among groups of social scientists.» A tentative lists involving broad categories, was made up; it included features such as the setting of politics (e. g., an enumeration of the most significant contextual factors of all political settings and pertaining to geography, economics, and sociological problems), the sphere of politics, and the political «elite» (the decision makers). Among other categories were named: how decisions are made and how are they obeyed? How are politics expressed in practice («policy aspiration groups and power aspiration groups»)? Finally, much thought was given to the performance of a system in regard to its stability, adjustment and change; this would involve an investigation into the «legitimacy myth, and the relationship between formal and informal powers.» (16).

The «Report» on the findings of a meeting, which lasted seven weeks, was submitted for critical consideration to several experts, including Professors Carl J. Friedrich and Harold D. Laswell. It is impressive to note that most reviewers felt the need for a thorough reconsideration of the field of comparative government and politics; most, however, concentrated on a different emphasis. Professor Friedrich, while acknowledging «legitimacy» as an important aspect of power and «that make - beliefs (,myths') associated with making power legitimate are of key interest to political science,» queried the extent of concern given to these problems in the report. By expressing some concern over the report's «excessive abstraction and formalism» (in the face of its «avowed hostility to formal approaches») Friedrich pointed out that historical development would always emerge into new problems. «These problems are usually the result not of abstract ratiocination but of the actual evolution of human society.» (17).

Friedrich has always felt that «political science is largely a critical examination of common-sense notions concerning the working of political institutions and procedures» derived from history and law and might lead to the conversion of common-sense notions into scientific hypotheses «formulated for the purpose of discovering general rules or

(15) For more detail see *Ibid.*, pp. 653 - 655.

(16) *Ibid.*, p. 652, f.

(17) *Ibid.*, p. 658.

'laws' of politics.» While he agreed that there is a need for the development of strictly scientific hypotheses, he also insisted that political scientists, in cooperation with the other social sciences and disciplines, concentrate on their primary task, «the study and understanding of governmental processes.» Certainly it should «not allow itself to be sidetracked into the more misty realms of a sociology whose aims to scientific value is compounded of hopes and pretenses, rather than solid accomplishments of a scientific and scholarly certainty beyond dispute.»

There were also thoughtful warnings that perhaps the Seminar might have been itself too parochial, though unwillingly, by thinking too much in terms of governments based on Western concepts and experiences. Professor Braibanti of Duke University pointed out that, for instance, certain elements in Chinese and Japanese constitutional thoughts «cannot be productively compared to anything in the West.» This should be suggestive of the problem that «any study of Asia which ignores the total fabric of society is likely to be unproductive.» (18)

Professor Heckscher's *The Study of Comparative Government and Politics*, published in 1957, is the report of the round-table Conference of April 1954 in Florence. In the «Preface» to the book, Professor William A. Robson pointed out that, while Professor Heckscher had fully used the papers contributed to the round-table as well as the ensuing discussions, the essay was to be considered as far more than a report in the ordinary sense of the word. «It is, I believe, the first monograph to explore at length the methodological problems involved in the study of comparative government and politics.» The book is based on the papers, which were used in separate sessions. These specific meetings were concerned with the following topics :

- (a) The nature, scope and purpose of the study of comparative government,
- (b) Studies of particular areas
- (c) Democratic control of foreign policy
- (d) Political parties
- (e) Contemporary revolutionary movements
- (f) Parliamentary procedure
- (g) Electoral systems and elections
- (h) Nationalized industries
- (i) Methods of research and methods of teaching.

(18) *Ibid.*, pp. 7 - 9.

(19) Heckscher *op. cit.*, p. 14.

Professor Heckscher, as the rapporteur-general of the meeting, could afford to draw exclusively on the contributions of all participants and enter his own observations and ideas since the Florence round-table did not reach a point that a «formal agreement was reached or even attempted as to the conclusions, and on a considerable number of points major disagreements remained at the end of the discussions.» (19) Referring to the steadily increasing interest in *methodology*, Professor Heckscher, while being aware that «methodological discussions and studies are useful, not to say indispensable» for the improvement of research and sophisticated knowledge, described also the dangers of misunderstanding the character of methodology :

«There is no a priori deductive theory to be developed without regard to the exigencies of actual research and teaching. What we attempt is rather a statement of procedure based on critical observation of work performed so far. While a number of knotty theoretical problems have to be dealt with at various stages, methodology is on the whole intensely practical and not a science in itself.» (20)

Heckscher feels concern in regard to the new trend in the social sciences, and political science in particular, a trend seemingly indicating that the social scientists appear «to suffer from a hypnotic preoccupation with the exact natural sciences.»

Physics, mathematics, chemistry, mechanics, are regarded as preeminently scientific and all other scholars are developing an inferiority complex. Consequently, they yearn for measurable quantities, absolute conclusions on causality. (21).

It would behoove us therefore to accept that ours is not a «scientific» science «in exactly the same way and to the extent as, let us say, physics», The best we can hope for is that scientificness will become an attitude of mind. Our task then would be to be critical as to the reliability and especially the validity of our results. «Thus, we have to accept our own limitations. By the same token, however, we must see that we are conscious of them. We may possibly observe general tendencies, but we cannot expect to find, 'laws of political behaviour.'» Once we have recognized our limitations, there is no reason to fear the admission of our science being only descriptive. All we need to do in order to come closer

(20) *Ibid.*, p. 16.

(21) *Ibid.*, p. 20.

to the final truth is the steady refinement of our instruments of description. (22).

Under these circumstances we must be aware that the cultural sciences cannot be expected to be subject to predictability. For while doubtless some quantities can be measured, e. g., through public opinion polls, others just cannot. There must be serious doubt whether we can ever hope for sound and objective hypotheses. After all, our problems frequently change and together with them our hypotheses. Finally, when it comes to the problem of relationship between the various fields of social science and that of an inter-disciplinary approach, it should be anticipated «that while cooperation is indeed necessary and exchange of experiences highly useful,» there are definite methodological differences. Thus when it comes to using all related sciences, «we should use their results and study their methods but not necessarily copy their jargon.»

Heckscher, being aware of «a definite hunger for discussion of methodological principles, and notably in the United States», considers this trend as a reaction to the former stand taken in America :

«Probably because of the over-emphasis on pragmatism formerly usual on the Western side of the Atlantic, there is in American political science today a great anxiety to get down to fundamentals - just as the formerly more speculative Europeans are anxious to deal with nothing but solid facts.» (23)

There is, according to Heckscher, some need for a methodological approach with an eye on continuous perfection. On the other hand, we must also remain conscious of the limitation of this type of approach particularly when it comes to methodology in the abstract.

Professor Heckscher comes to the conclusion that when the point of teaching comparative government is under discussion, «the student should see problems rather than be cocksure about solutions.» Only in due time will the more advanced student find some encouragement within himself to hypothesizing. But in the beginning, Professor Heckscher asserts :

«... without the basis provided by a knowledge of a number of separate countries, students cannot have the familiarity with various national institutions which alone can enable them to start making comparisons of their own. The data have to be given to them before they start employing the comparative method.»

(22) *Ibid.*, pp. 20 - 22.

(23) *Ibid.*, p. 28.

Under these circumstances there is need for the country - by - country approach, which is «a necessary prelude to direct comparison.» Pure functional comparison can take place only at a more advanced stage.

While conceding that the considerations mentioned are mainly pedagogical and therefore concerned with teaching rather than with research, Heckscher proposes :

«But in so far as teaching is to be considered as the 'mother' of research they should probably have a certain influence on the techniques to be employed in comparative studies for research purposes. The collection of at least a considerable quantity of data concerning different countries and areas is a necessary preliminary not only to conclusions but also to hypothesising. It is true that mere fact - finding without hypotheses is dull and pedestrian. But it is equally true that hypothesising without a factual basis is nothing more than metaphysical speculation. This comes out forcibly when we are confronted with the practical needs of teaching comparative government, but it applies to research as well as to teaching.» (24).

After having looked into the controversy between «methodological hypothesizers» and the «country - by - country functionalists» the teacher concerned with the study of foreign governments must decide for himself what to do. There seems to be no doubt that, like in all fields of human endeavor, comparison must follow the initial description of individual countries. No person should be this certain that - at least in the fields where man and the social sciences are in the center of academic interest and inquiry - we can come to easy and foregone conclusions, certainly not those that give us a chance to make predictions for all similar cases to come. There seem to be always situations that just cannot be predicted. Some of the great upheavals of modern times, the economic crises that have occurred and their political consequences will not lend themselves to such categorization that we could predict similar things to happen. It certainly holds true when we will have to consider the impact of specific personalities in given settings and under particular conditions. There seems to be no chance to find the all - inclusive formula, the patent solution to end all other solutions. We cannot - perhaps unfortunately, yet it also might be the very best for man - obtain the scheme by which human behavior in government and politics will become as clear as the explanation of, let us say, lightning. We cannot expect to take away, for the benefit of our students and student - generations to

(24) *Ibid.*, see in particular pp. 63 - 66.

come, intellectual doubt, nor abolish the chances for academic blood, sweat and tears. In the quest for a great new, and highly necessary, theory many of us seem to be motivated too much and to act too boldly and with impatience. Thus for the teacher there is probably one proposal: most of us will have to continue - and at times probably in a most pedestrian manner - with looking into individual countries, observe their problems and development, and speculate about the reason why certain things have happened and might happen. Perhaps then we will come to the new analysis that, in the long run, might, after all, make comparison easier and more useful.