

A Post-Cold War Approach

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My preference in teaching comparative politics is to take the vertical rather than the horizontal approach, i.e., comparing countries rather than concepts, institutions or processes. I believe the horizontal approach is flawed simply because not all countries have systems or processes that are directly comparable. Against this background, my contention is that the most fundamental problem afflicting the sub-discipline is classification. Without being clear about what we are comparing, it is impossible to know how we should be making the comparisons, and what our ultimate objectives should be.

I propose that the study of comparative politics has for too long been handicapped and misled by the three worlds system of classification (or variations on the three worlds theme), that recent changes in the world demand the creation of a new and more relevant system, and that comparativists must lead the way in designing a new classificatory system that allows political scientists—and society at large—to make more sense of politics and government around the world.

The audience. Instructors must first be clear about who their students are, what their students need, and what they (the instructors) hope to provide for their students. Generally, I have found most students entering the class with a level of knowledge of other political systems, of world history, and of world geography that ranges from middling to truly appalling. Given the low levels of political literacy and the high number of nonmajors in my classes, I believe that the primary function of introductory comparative politics courses is to provide students (within the limits of a single semester) with the information and perspective they need to make sense of the political world outside the United States. We need to help create a politically literate population that is in a position to

understand the many and rapid changes that are taking place in the world, and to relate productively and intelligently to that world in the 1990s and the next century.

This begs the fundamental question of how best to offer these students a representative sampling of the world's 192 independent nation-states. Without fair and balanced representation, true comparison and understanding is difficult, if not impossible. Just as the zoologist cannot make generalizations about animal behavior without examining a representative cross section of species, so comparative politics cannot work without a representative cross section of political systems.

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The weaknesses of the three worlds system. The issue of classification has been complicated over time by the fact that the goalposts are constantly being moved. At one time, comparativists used city-states as their unit of comparison. Then, empires became the most common political unit. Now we deal with nation-states. However, nation-states have been going through many changes. Until the mid-1960s, it might have been reasonable to divide the world (as we did) into three worlds: industrialized liberal democracies, centrally planned economies, and so-called “developing” or “less-developed” countries.

But central planning is now no longer in vogue, and the supposedly amorphous mass of developing countries is patently no longer amorphous (and never really was).

The three worlds system was nice and neat, which is why it was so attractive. However, it has always had several fatal flaws. (1) It is Eurocentric, and by committing 135 countries (containing roughly 80% of the world's population) to the catchall Third World, it perpetuates the thinking of the colonial era. (2) It never really made much sense, and it has made even less sense since the break-up of the Soviet bloc. The First World is the only group that still holds up, because it is relatively homogeneous, and its members fit together reasonably well (even though there is debate about exactly who qualifies to be included). The Second World becomes a little shakier, because of disagreement on which countries to include. By the time the classification reaches the Third World, it has lost any semblance of unity, order, consistency, or utility. (3) Although it began life as a system of political categorization, the distinguishing features of the three worlds system are mainly economic. (4) It is value-laden. The labels First, Second, and Third in themselves imply a ranking.

To compound these problems, the many changes that have taken place in the world since the mid-1980s have added a final, fatal flaw to the three worlds system: it is irrelevant. The cold war has ended, global politics is no longer dominated by the rivalry between the two superpowers, the Soviet hegemony over Eastern Europe has ended, and the U.S.S.R. has ceased to exist. East Asian countries have strengthened their economic influence in the world, and many Asian and Latin American countries have seen rapid economic development and the emergence of new democratic political values.

Meanwhile, the European Union is emerging as a new economic and political force, challenging us to rethink our concept of the nation-state. Perhaps the nation-state is dying as a political unit, and in future we will think in terms of free trade areas and regional groupings.

The five-system approach. I use a five-system approach that not only broadens the study of comparative politics but provides a level of political, economic, social, cultural, ethnic, linguistic, geographical, and religious variety that reflects the realities of the world in the 1990s. The five systems are as follows:

- (1) *Liberal democracies.* These roughly correspond with the old First World, including 24 of the world's wealthiest and most politically stable countries. Liberal democracies are defined as countries with a relatively high level of modernization, postindustrial economies, relatively well-defined and stable political institutions and processes, a relatively well-defined state structure, free, regular and competitive elections, and a relatively high regard for civil liberties and human rights.
- (2) *Communist and post-Communist (CPC) states.* This group roughly corresponds with the old Second World, and is currently the most unstable and changeable of the five groups. I define the 34 CPC states as those en route either *towards* or *away from* centrally planned state socialism. Either way, they are still best understood in terms of their past or present adherence to state socialism, and—politically—to the structures and processes created by Lenin, Stalin, Mao, or their surrogates.
- (3) *Newly industrializing countries*

(*NICs*). NICs are 21 so-called “Third World” countries that have achieved a significant level of political stability and economic development (eg, Brazil, Mexico, India). NICs are defined here as countries that are building stable governmental systems with free elections and genuine choice and have shifted substantially away from agricultural economies towards industry and economies that are both export-led and service-based.

- (4) *Less developed countries (LDCs).* This group consists of 36 mainly Central American and sub-Saharan African states with long-term potential but short-term problems, such as a limited economic base, ethnic problems, rapid population growth, military governments or one-party rule, environmental degradation, large agricultural/pastoral sectors, and agricultural decline. Examples include Nigeria, Zimbabwe, and Colombia.
- (5) *The Islamic world.* This group encapsulates 25 countries under the common influence of Islam, and marks the most serious omission from most existing introductory comparative politics courses. Islam is chosen as a theme because it is more than a religion, and it offers a complete package for ordering government and society, a fact all too commonly overlooked in the West. Islamic values (and the tension between Islamism and Secularism) explain the dynamics of politics in these countries better than any other factors. In all these countries, Islam is the religion of the majority, and has had an impact on political development unlike that of any other religion in any other part of the world.

These five system-types between them account for 140 of the world's 192 independent nation-states. The remaining 52 countries fall into two additional categories: (1) micro-states—26 countries that are so small that size is the primary factor in their economic and political development; and (2) marginal states (26 in all) which suffer persistent political instability, a limited economic base, and severe social problems (e.g., Rwanda, Lebanon, Haiti).

The underlying theme in this system of classification is that politics cannot be divorced from economics, culture, history, or from society at large. Superficially, it may seem as though some of the system-types are based on very different factors, or that countries have been put in categories for reasons that do not allow real comparison. At the end of the day, however, the countries in each category all have a cluster of critical factors in common that most obviously help explain the nature of their political systems. In short, they are *best understood* as members of one system-type over another.

About the Author

John McCormick is an assistant professor in political science at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI). His areas of interest are comparative politics and public policy, with a focus on the European Union and environmental policy. His latest publication, *Comparative Politics in Transition* (Wadsworth, 1995), is an introductory text for comparative politics and this article outlines the rationale behind the text.

