

# Teaching Comparative Politics in the 1990s

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In seeking to bring together the three tasks of teaching facts, introducing concepts, and beginning comparative analysis, many instructors of the introductory course have used some variation on the concept of "three worlds"—a First World of Western, industrialized democracies; a Second World of communist states following a similar Stalinist pattern of political and economic organization; and a much more diverse Third World of non-Western, economically struggling states with a wide variety of authoritarian political patterns.

By identifying and explaining differences and similarities within and between these different types of systems and the political consequences of these differences, instructors were able to introduce students to the use of comparative analysis. Now, with the disappearance of communism in Eastern and Central Europe, one of these three points of reference has disappeared. And economic success in several newly industrialized countries adds further confusion to this simple division of the world.

*Choice of countries.* The selection of countries covered in the comparative introductory course has been diverse since the waning of interest in the so-called "major foreign powers" of Europe in the late 1960s. Most instructors have felt the need to provide some information on at least one country from each of the three major types (democratic, communist, and developing). But there has been no consensus on which ones should be covered, with many instructors assuming or claiming that their examples sufficiently represent a broad category of political experience. Their selections have often been based on their own knowledge of particular countries or contemporary events such as elections or civil wars that make those countries more visible than others and

therefore more accessible to the introductory student.

While there has been no consensus, there have been some distinct preferences. Britain has been the most frequent country from the Western democratic tradition with France a close second. The former U.S.S.R. was usually included as exemplary of the communist political experience. China has also become a frequent example of communist experience. There was far less consistency in the selection of Third World countries. Among the most common were India, Mexico, and Nigeria.

There are now other countries that many of us believe should be taught that are rarely among those included in the introductory course. Japan has emerged as an important country because of its economic prominence and potential role as a powerful international actor. Japan is also a useful case because of its experience in adapting Western democracy to a non-Western setting. A survey of comparative politics scholars in 1988 found strong support for including Japan in the introductory courses in comparative politics (Editor's Note in Pempel *et al.* 1992), but in practice Japan is rarely covered.

While Germany is more frequently included than Japan, an argument can easily be made that its political experience too should be included more often in our courses for introductory students. Germany's growing economic and political prominence in Europe may make it a more important example of West European democracy than France or even Britain. The success in building democracy in a once authoritarian setting makes Germany a useful example for discussions of democratization. The current problems in unifying the two parts of Germany illustrate the durable consequences of political culture.

Arguments could also be made to support the inclusion of some of

the newly industrialized countries. Taiwan, South Korea, Hong Kong, Singapore, and the Philippines could be taught to give examples of successful economic development. Their difficulties in making the transition from authoritarian to more open political systems illustrate the weak association of industrialization and democratization.

While persuasive arguments can be made to include any or all of these countries, they cannot simply be added to the existing list of countries we cover. Including too many countries will leave students confused by an avalanche of information about countries they knew nothing about before beginning the course. The result can be a pedagogic equivalent to the "if it's Tuesday, it must be Belgium" tourist phenomenon.

My own experience has been that students who do not have the opportunity to get a broad understanding of a few foreign countries leave the course unable to apply or really understand the conceptual material we try to teach them. In a semester-long course, it is difficult to provide such a factual background for more than four or five countries and still be able to cover the essential concepts and theories.

That means that if we want to add Japan, Germany, and a newly industrialized country, we will probably have to drop one or more of the countries we are currently teaching. But which ones? Most instructors will be loath to drop either Britain or France if only because the political features of these two countries remain points of reference for discussion of politics around the world. Britain remains an outstanding example of parliamentary and party government. These forms have been copied around the world. France, too, is kept in introductory courses because its troubled path to democratic stability may be more relevant to establishing stable democracy in other places than the more

evolutionary experiences of Britain or the United States.

A few have suggested that the collapse of the U.S.S.R. and subsequent political disarray in that part of the world may make it a likely candidate for omission. Most of us, however, still feel that the political, economic, and strategic importance of what used to be the U.S.S.R. warrants our continued attention to its internal political forms. In many ways, the transition from a centralized, authoritarian state to some other form of government—democratic or not—makes the former U.S.S.R. an especially interesting case for those concerned with the concepts of political change and “democratization.” Certainly, we do have to redefine what we teach in that part of the world: Russia alone, or all or some of the separate succession states to the old U.S.S.R.?

One danger to avoid would be the temptation to dilute coverage of developing countries as we try to find places in our courses for Japan, Germany, or the newly industrialized countries. The political experience in those parts of the world that remain less developed is poorly understood by our introductory students. Their knowledge of these Third World countries is generally based on negative stereotypes. We should continue our efforts to break these stereotypes and expose our introductory students to the richness of political experience and the serious political and economic challenges of the developing countries.

*Rethinking concepts and theories.* The unsettled nature of politics in so many parts of the world may well be used by instructors to rely more heavily on our concepts and theories even in the introductory courses. For example, if we cannot say much about the ultimate nature of the still emerging political parties in Russia, we can teach our students about the origins of parties, differences between authoritarian and democratic parties, and the place of parties in governing. As we teach them these concepts and show them how to apply them to a few countries, they can then use

them later to evaluate trends and developments that they will later read about as citizens.

There has always been tension between our need to provide introductory students with descriptive material about a few countries and our desire to introduce them to the conceptual and theoretical finds of comparative politics. More often than not, the descriptions prevail over comparative analysis. The constantly changing setting we now face in so many parts of the world gives us a new opportunity and incentive to redress this balance with a greater emphasis on the theoretical materials.

*The search for a new framework for pedagogical comparisons.* For the past three decades, many of us have used a three-fold division of the world into the Western democratic, communist, and Third World as a framework for pedagogical comparisons. We have not found this three world division very useful for our comparative research. But it has served to assist us in drawing broader conclusions as we compared, for example, a party government in the West with a party state in the U.S.S.R. and with a no-party state in the military’s rule of Nigeria. In many cases, we used this division more to separate our courses into tidy units than to take advantage of the comparative opportunities offered by the three regime types. More importantly, the categories were always more heterogeneous than we were able to convey to our students.

Now the problems are even more acute. The collapse of communism has meant the virtual disappearance of the Second World. The remaining communist regimes are disparate in their political forms, and many question their long-term survival. In addition, how do the former communist countries fit into our analytical and comparative frameworks? Not yet democracies and no longer communist dictatorships, it is not clear how we should look at them as we seek comparative frameworks. The newly industrialized countries no longer fit in the “developing world,” but they

are not yet democratic in the Western sense. Japan, too, fits only with some difficulty into the category of “Western” democracies.

One solution would be to continue as we have with a modified three world framework. Even if the Second World is no longer communist, many of the former Warsaw Pact countries have similar economic and political problems. They will follow different paths to new political structures and the comparison of how these countries resemble each other and differ as they adjust to a post-communist era will be interesting grist for our comparative mills. Those who feel that the three world framework should be abandoned may wish to reconsider the area study approach by looking at and comparing countries from the same general world region. Certainly, the area approach remained in use for much of our comparative research even as we used the three world concept for our introductory teaching.

One other approach to moving beyond the three world framework would be the use of paired comparisons. In this approach, instructors would select pairs of countries whose comparison helps to illustrate important political phenomena: Britain and France; Russia and China; India and Nigeria. The paired comparisons assist in going beyond merely describing single countries and allow us to introduce students to some systematic comparative analysis.

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## References

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## About the Author

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