

# **THE STUDY OF COMPARATIVE GOVERNMENT AND POLITICS**

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Gunnar Heckscher

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*By*

GUNNAR HECKSCHER

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POLITICS

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GUNNAR HECKSCHER

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in the University of Stockholm

WITH A PREFACE  
BY  
WILLIAM A. ROBSON

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## PREFACE

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THE work by Professor Gunnar Heckscher which is now published for the first time is the report of a round table conference on teaching and research in comparative government held by the International Political Science Association in Florence from April 5-10, 1954. Although Professor Heckscher has drawn freely and fully on the papers contributed to the round table, and on the discussions which took place there, his essay is 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 subject was admirably suited to an international meeting of political scientists. For it bears on the question how far conclusions drawn from the experience of one country can be validly applied to the political systems of other countries; and the conditions which must be taken into account in attempting to answer that question. Can the data of government and politics be regarded as strictly comparable in any sense, or is it unique to the particular countries from which it is drawn? What are the merits and demerits of the different methods of approaching the subject? How far must the political scientist rely on the findings of neighbouring disciplines, such as history or economics or sociology, in studying a foreign country? What do we mean by area studies? These are a few of the significant points on which those who organised the meeting hoped an international discussion would throw some light.

My own interest in the subject had been stimulated by a report I had prepared for I.P.S.A. on *The University Teaching*

of *Political Science* (published by UNESCO in 1954). This was based on national reports from twelve selected countries, in all of which some teaching of comparative government takes place. I was also aware of the intense interest in the methodology of comparative government and politics aroused by the challenging ideas put forward by a group of American political scientists at a seminar held in Evanston, Illinois, in 1952 and of which a report was published in the *American Political Science Review* in 1953.<sup>1</sup>

The round table in Florence was attended by about forty political scientists coming from twelve countries, including some situated in Western Europe, some in North and South America, and some in Asia. Thirty papers were contributed on different aspects of the subject: these papers were grouped round the following themes, to which separate discussion sessions were devoted:

- The nature, scope and purpose of the study of comparative government
- Studies of particular areas
- Democratic control of foreign policy
- Political parties
- Contemporary revolutionary movements
- Parliamentary procedure
- Electoral systems and elections
- Nationalised industries
- Methods of research and methods of teaching.

It was hoped to print some of these papers in the present volume, and this was the desire of Professor Heckscher; but it was unfortunately not possible for the publishers to do this from a commercial point of view.

It fell to me, as president of I.P.S.A. at the time, to appoint Professor Heckscher to act as the rapporteur-general of the

<sup>1</sup> 'Research in Comparative Politics.' Vol. XLVII, September 1953, p. 641.

round table meeting. The outstanding quality of his report shows that my decision was a fortunate one. I wish to thank Professor Heckscher warmly for his great efforts on behalf of the International Political Science Association. I hope that a wide circle of political scientists in many countries will recognise his report as a masterly presentation of the main problems of methodology involved in the study of comparative government and politics. It deserves to be regarded as an indispensable introduction to the subject which every student should read.

The discussions at Florence were of a most stimulating character and often reached a very high level. There was a great clatter of debate by the exponents of different schools and the proponents of diverse outlooks. Traditionalists and innovators were both well represented; and there were participants from some of the neglected countries as well as from the favoured lands which have been the happy hunting grounds of writers on comparative government. At the end of the meeting everyone had learnt something, and most of us felt our horizons had been broadened.

The International Political Science Association received a generous grant from the Ford Foundation which enabled it to invite certain eminent scholars from the United States who otherwise would not have been able to attend. The cordial thanks of I.P.S.A. have already been conveyed to the Ford Foundation. UNESCO has been closely associated with the present project from its beginning. As part of its activities in the field of teaching of political science, UNESCO has been a co-sponsor of the present study and has made a financial contribution to the holding of the meeting as well as to the preparation of the present report.

Florence was an ideal setting for the round table meeting, which was held there by invitation of the Italian Political and Social Sciences Association. The beauty of the city and its works of art; the loveliness of the surrounding countryside and neighbouring towns; the warmth and splendour of the

hospitality which was offered to the members of the round table, contributed greatly both to the success of the meeting and to the enjoyment of those who attended it. To Professor F. Vito, President of the Italian Political and Social Sciences Association, and to Professor G. Maranini, President of the Faculty of Political Sciences in the University of Florence, our thanks are specially due.

WILLIAM A. ROBSON  
*London School of Economics  
and Political Science*  
October, 1956

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## PART ONE





## INTRODUCTION

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THE need of studying comparative government has always been recognised. In fact, all the classical works on political theory were more or less based on a comparative approach. It is known that Aristotle prepared a number of studies of various governments before embarking on his *Politics*; 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. One has only to glance through some chapters of, e.g., Montesquieu and Rousseau to note the enormous importance given by them to the findings of comparative government. When the study of political science was established in the nineteenth century, a number of the most important works were monographs dealing with only one country. Yet no one reading Bagehot or Dicey can fail to observe that some of their most important ideas are based on comparison; and there were in this period other authors consciously attempting a presentation in the field of comparative government, such as Ostrogorski and Bryce.

Recently, the method of comparison has come under intensified discussion. Indirectly, already some of the older works discuss questions of this type, but it is only in the last ten years that interest in methodological problems has become conscious. A report by a research panel in comparative government was published in 1944. The UNESCO handbook in *Contemporary Political Science* at least touched on the question. It was discussed to a considerable extent at the round table on the teaching of political science organised by I.P.S.A.

in 1952 and in the subsequent report by W. A. Robson.<sup>1</sup> The interest shown on this occasion was, in fact, the main reason for I.P.S.A.'s decision to devote a particular round table to the study of comparative government. In the meantime the report of the inter-university seminar organised at Evanston by the Social Science Research Council in the summer of 1952 had been published together with comments. Obviously, this report loomed rather large in the discussions at the international round table, although it was originally meant to be only tentative and explorative. As a means of stimulating discussion it was, however, extremely successful.

The international round table organised by I.P.S.A. was held in Florence April 5-10, 1954, under the very favourable auspices created by the Italian Political Science Association. It comprised over fifty participants drawn from fourteen different countries. Twenty-seven working papers, dealing with various aspects of the problem, were submitted by the participants.

In preparing the following report, the reporter has felt free to draw extensively on the papers and other contributions by the participants of the round table, even though it has not been possible to make explicit reference to them except in comparatively few cases. He is, therefore, particularly anxious to express already at the outset his feeling of gratitude towards all those who co-operated in achieving whatever results were gained at the Florence meeting. On the other hand, no 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. The reporter, therefore, is responsible not only for the presentation of the subject matter but also for all conclusions and opinions presented in the report.

It is true that terms like 'comparative government' (or 'comparative politics')—as well as so many other descriptions of

<sup>1</sup> *The University Teaching of Political Science* published by UNESCO.

practical scientific fields—are *des étiquettes procédurales* and that no absolute or precise limits can be stated as to what should or should not be included in the study. This vagueness is at the back of certain difficulties which will appear in the following. At the same time, except for certain border-line cases there seems to be general agreement as to what is meant by the term. There is also agreement on the importance of studying it and on the whole even on the reasons for which such a study is regarded as profitable.

It is almost a platitude to point out what these reasons are. Comparative studies are the core of any study of 'foreign' governments. They are of pedagogical importance, especially if we are to gain a reasonably realistic and relativistic view of our own government. Because of the growth of international contacts, scientific, political or economic comparisons between different countries, as well as a knowledge of foreign institutions, are of great practical value.

These reasons may be called 'informational' or 'utilitarian.' They include the pragmatic approach: we want to draw on foreign examples which may give us ideas for the development of our own institutions. Similarly, we may flatter ourselves that a knowledge of our institutions may help others: 'the discipline has a mission to fulfil in imparting our experience to other nations and to integrating scientifically their institutions into a universal pattern of civilised government.' Nobody can be expected to deny the strength of considerations such as these.

But there are other reasons concerned with the development of political science itself. If we regard our field of study as mainly descriptive, comparisons are required to help us refine our tools of description. If we have hopes of establishing a general theory on an inductive basis, we can do so only through comparison. If we attempt to test specific hypotheses, this is possible only if we bring in a sufficient number of examples, to be investigated by the comparative method.