

Student Book Features: Comparative Politics

Written by Jonathan Kirkup

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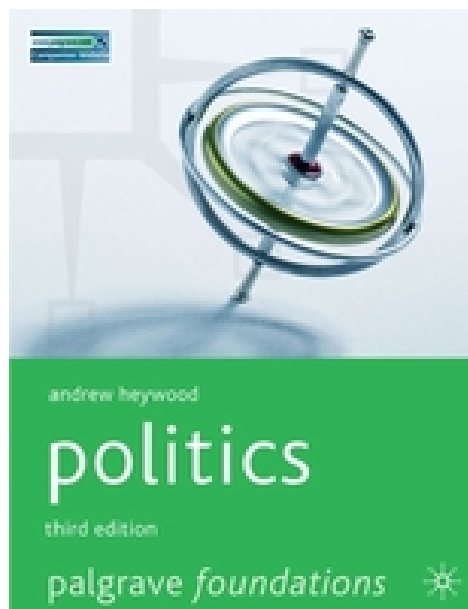
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JONATHAN KIRKUP, JAN 25 2013

Most undergraduates embarking on a degree in international relations will be compelled, at least in their first year of study, to become familiar with the broader aspects of political science as an academic discipline. This process will invariably include a course on political philosophy and a general politics course in which political systems, political interaction and the machinery of government are discussed. In an effort to stress to students the importance of avoiding ethnocentrism, these courses are often constructed around a comparative politics framework.

This post reviews four publications which might be considered introductory texts for students studying comparative politics or a module in which political systems and political ideas are discussed.

Undergraduates undertaking this type of course are relatively well served by the academic literature. The high volume of students, under the direction of their tutors, who dutifully buy the 'recommended reading' means that much of the literature which students will encounter is relatively current; often having been recently revised and updated. Most are written by active academics, in many cases with extensive undergraduate teaching experience. Indeed many publications have been produced with specific courses in mind or subsequently had courses built around them. To some extent these attributes are true of each of the books reviewed below.



Andrew Heywood's **Politics** (2007, third edition, Palgrave Macmillan: Basingstoke), now in its third edition (with a fourth due in spring 2013) seeks to act as a general overarching introductory textbook on the academic discipline of politics as part of Palgrave Macmillan's 'Foundations' series. It is aimed at first year undergraduates engaging with political concepts for the first time. Its scope is broadly comparative in nature without discussing the methodological aspect of comparison. While a wide array of political concepts are discussed, there is a clear emphasis on western political systems and culture.

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The book is divided into five central themes: theories of politics; nations and globalisation; political interaction; machinery of government, and policy and performance. Each section is in turn sub-divided into chapters addressing key concepts. This methodology means that in under six-hundred pages Heywood addresses a broad array of issues including: political ideologies, the role of the state, political culture and election law. Each chapter concludes with a summary of key points and another seemingly ever-present feature in the modern textbook: 'questions for discussion and further reading'. These features are well executed; a glossary of terms and a quite extensive bibliography is a useful addendum.

In less sure hands this approach of addressing so many issues in a single volume might have resulted in an incoherent and confusing book, however, Heywood's engaging, erudite and authoritative style ensures the narrative happily skips along without any substantial loss of clarity. Nevertheless, this approach clearly can never give a comprehensive analysis of the subject in hand. Heywood has written extensively for A-level students and at times this publication seems more transitional between secondary school and university, rather than a truly degree level publication. There is almost no reference to methodological approaches to political science and concepts are often merely alluded to rather than explored in detail. For example, to address 18 distinct political ideologies from Liberalism and Conservatism to Marxism, Fascism, anarchism and feminism in little over 30 pages is perhaps stretching 'introductory' to the extreme, and a more focused approach on fundamental principles might have been more instructive. Certainly section five, on 'Policy and performance', is in reality relegated to little more than one chapter and has the feel of a token effort.

In its defence, Heywood's *Politics* doesn't pretend to be a comprehensive study of the discipline, instead the author directs studies to 'further reading' with a very useful short review of the key attributes of each source highlighted.

Heywood's *Politics* has some distinctive advantages over its competitors, even those within the Palgrave Foundations stable, which students new to the discipline will cherish. Key concepts or contested ideas are introduced with care and are often afforded a separate text box. Similarly, the text is interspersed with short biographies of political philosophers, as well as some of the key academics in the field. Accompanied by an image of the person in question, a list of principle works and how they have contributed to the discipline are reviewed, a feature that breathes life into the issues under discussion. And some of the biographical notes will interest even the most advanced reader.

Heywood's *Politics* does exactly what it says on the tin, a well-written, well-edited and well-produced introductory textbook designed for first year undergraduate seeking a broad understanding of the discipline before embarking on a degree programme, or seeking undemanding tutorial reading. The publication will remain a useful quick reference work for students in later years of study, although it should be stressed that more in depth and analytical publications should be sought at this stage of study.

The third edition, now over five years old, does not use weblinks to the publisher's online resources, and some of the case studies are now a little out of date, however, I am informed a more interactive format will be evident in the next edition – perhaps worth the wait.

A good stepping stone in the process to more in-depth study, but retaining the feel of an introductory text is Daniele Caramani's

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edited volume **Comparative Politics** (2011, second edition, Oxford University Press: Oxford), now in its second edition. Caramani, Professor of Comparative Politics at the University of Gallen, has brought together thirty academics, many of whom are leading thinkers in their respective disciplines, to compile an in-depth text book on the comparative method in practice. Caramani's objective is a comprehensive and wide-ranging text book designed for module study, compiling a collection of thematic chapters each with an emphasis on comparative analysis and methodology with some cross-over between topics to enable students to appreciate the academic intercourse which exists within the discipline. In this endeavour he is largely successful.

The result is an authoritative and dense collection of articles, beginning with an overview of the history of the discipline and the evolution of various methodological approaches to comparison. The book is subsequently divided into five further sections: structures and institutions, actors and processes, public policies and a final section, which has been extensively remodelled for this new edition, entitled 'beyond the state'. While there has been some rationalisation on some topics when compared with the first edition, the second edition has been expanded to cover trade unions and networks of decision-making, and reviews the progress of globalization in light of the world financial crisis. The book concludes with what might be considered 'a bonus feature', an appendix of country profiles, world trends and tables on social and economic comparison and finally, a glossary of terms – which is not as extensive as it might be given the broad concepts and methodologies discussed in the text.

Like Heywood's *Politics*, the textbook format of *Comparative Politics* ensures a liberal use of text boxes in which key points are addressed. Similarly, case studies on specific questions that might be addressed in a tutorial are a nice addition. An example being: when discussing party systems the question is asked 'Why is there no socialism in the USA?' Each chapter is interspersed with a link to Oxford University press online resource centre – a nice touch, which adds a great deal to this edition and given an impression of a more holistic learning experience. The end of each chapter has clear conclusions and questions for discussion, with further reading and web links to the publisher's online resources. Again, this aspect of the book is well-researched and particularly extensive.

The academic rigour of *Comparative Politics* is unquestionably high and is more instructive and in-depth than other similar publications such as Powell, Dalton and Strom, (2012) [*Comparative Politics Today: International Edition*. Pearson: Illinois]. Concepts and methodological approaches are discussed in detail; this is certainly a virtue for students reading for tutorial study. The only slight criticism is that those seeking analysis of a more in-depth study of the methodology of comparison as part of a political science course, perhaps in the second or third year of study, will have to look elsewhere. Meanwhile, from my own experience of working with this book in a tutorial setting, the editorial format means that concepts are at times introduced by respective authors without due explanation and the terminology used, while perfectly acceptable to those familiar with the discipline, can be bewildering to the uninitiated. As ever with edited volumes, especially ones compiled using such an international collection of

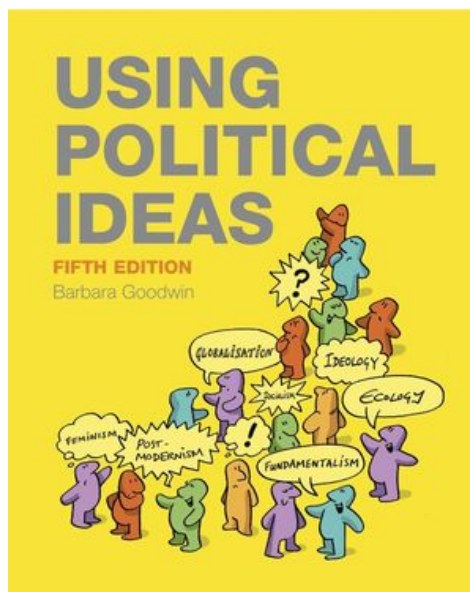
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academics, there is on occasion a disparity between authors in their ability to translate theories and concepts into lucid prose. Conversely there are various chapters that stand out. Caramani's own chapter on party systems and Michael Gallagher's on elections are well-constructed, meanwhile the chapter by the late Peter Mair, on Democracies, is a particular highlight, and shows what the academic community has lost since his untimely death.

Caramani explains in the preface of this second edition that it is 'more concise' than the first. In a publication extending to nearly 700 pages this contraction might be considered a virtue and the content is not unduly compromised by the changes. However, other noticeable changes between the two editions seem to have been largely motivated by a desire to save on publishing costs. The latest edition is set in a noticeably smaller font, and the format is altogether more cramped, text boxes are reduced in size and the use of a bold type to emphasize key terms within the text has been jettisoned. As a result what had previously been an almost indulgent layout becomes a more laborious process for the reader. Furthermore, these stylistic changes have been accompanied by relatively few changes to the original text, save for some updating of statistical data, and the additions noted above. Indeed, the absence of a more substantive reworking of the text seems to have led to some needless anomalies; for example Caramani talks of 2012 as being thirty years after the work of Lijpart in 1971 (Caramani, 2011:13). However, these issues should not be laid at the door of Caramani and are only a problem (ironically, given the title) when one compares the two editions.

In conclusion, Caramani's *Comparative Politics* is a textbook of significant intellectual merit, an essential companion for any undergraduate study of the methodology and key concepts in comparative politics and as such can transcend an entire degree programme. However, whether this necessitates the purchase of the second edition rather than using an old first edition copy is perhaps questionable.



Using Political Ideas (Goodwin, Barbara, 2007, fifth edition, Wiley: Chichester) is primarily a book on political philosophy, however, I have included it in this review on the basis that it can, unlike some of the more focused introductions to political theory, be found on reading list related to comparative politics. The reason for this is because rather than presenting a linear narrative of the history of political thought, Goodwin throughout this book reviews the various ideas discussed from the perspective of how these normative ideas are used in the real world. This format is particularly useful for tutorial discussions on political theory or politics in practice. By splitting the book into three distinct sections, Goodwin is able to outline first what ideology and political theory is, before looking in detail at various ideologies, and finally key concepts emphasising shifts to a review of political systems, power and authority and more normative concepts such as freedom, rights, social justice and equality.

Whereas Heywood gives a cursory outline of various ideologies, Goodwin addresses the same concepts, such as

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Liberalism, Socialism, Conservatism and Marxism among others, through a series of 15 distinct chapters. Each chapter in turn begins with a lucid and well-structured review of the origins and key characteristics of each ideology, followed by a critical analysis and review of the evolution and practical application of the ideology. So, when discussing totalitarianism, the US treatment of prisoners in Abu Ghraib is discussed. Similarly, the fact that Goodwin's objective is to *Use* political ideas means the latter half of the book looks at many of the concepts familiar to the comparative theories, eg democracy, the state, power and citizenship. To look at these issues from a normative perspective can only give a broader understanding of the discipline.

Goodwin cleverly interweaves real world examples and the influence of key thinkers in a discursive dialogue with the reader to ensure conceptual ideas are retained without losing any of the academic rigour, ensuring new concepts are introduced at a measured pace. The virtues of a single author are exemplified in the narrative style. Concepts outlined in one chapter are taken up later to good effect. For example, notions first outlined in the chapter on Liberalism are re-examined when discussing concepts such as Democracy, Nationalism and Feminism. This cross-over of ideas does not prevent the respective chapters standing on their own merits and as such are useful for tutorial study.

For all its virtues Goodwin *Using Political Ideas* is somewhat hampered by its stylistic structure when compared with more recent publications. Although the 5th edition is only five years old, this belies the fact it was first published in 1982. While Heywood and Caramani use to varying degrees tools that have in recent years become ubiquitous, as noted above, such as text boxes, graphics and questions at the end of chapters, Goodwin *Using Political Ideas* looks rather stale. In this way it can be difficult for today's undergraduates to penetrate, but if they take the time to actually read the text they will find a gem of a book, with clear and insightful explanations of ideological positions with informed and thought provoking case studies.

Goodwin *Using Political Ideas* after five editions has sold over 30,000 copies, it is high time it was revised and a sixth edition published with some refreshing stylistic changes.

The three previous titles reviewed here might be considered traditional undergraduate textbooks, addressing concepts and



methodology; however, in any comparative politics course there comes a time when focused case study analysis is required. **Developments in British Politics (*DinBP*)** (Heffernan, R, P Cowley and C Hay, 2011, Palgrave Macmillan: Basingstoke), as the title suggests, focuses solely on recent changes in the British political system. The

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objective of the editors is to bring together an assemblage of the most eminent academics working in the field to assess, through a series of edited chapters, the most recent political *developments* in British politics.

Over 25 years and eight previous incarnations this format has developed an unrivalled reputation for academic rigour, making *DinBP* a key component in any undergraduate course on British politics. This publication is no exception, with a veritable who's who in the study of British politics- Andrew Gamble's chapter on Britain and the World, David Denver on Elections and voting; and Richard Wyn Jones and Roger Scully on Post Devolution Britain are particularly strong. *Developments in British Politics* has a number of sister publications addressing developments in French, German, and Italian politics as well as the United States and the EU; however, the British politics edition is the original and most acclaimed and it is for this reason that I have chosen it for this review.

However, before this review turns into something you might find on the books dust jacket, rather than an objective appraisal of the text, let us assess its merits. Like its predecessors, this latest edition reviews, from an empirical and largely institutionalist perspective, the British political system, culture and governance, with an emphasis on the changes that have taken place since the last publication (in 2006). As such, while the last edition focused on New Labour and the Blair style of government, much of this latest edition addresses the change in the political landscape since the demise of the Labour government under the leadership of Gordon Brown; the 2010 General Election; and the subsequent emergence of a Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition. All of this is seen within the prism of the ongoing economic crisis. This substantial period of change means a number of the chapters, such as those addressing Constitutional politics by Meg Russell, Executive Governance by David Richards and political parties by Philip Cowley, are to some extent sub-divided between pre and post 2010 election or pre and post economic crisis.

Editors Heffernan, Cowley and Hay (Patrick Dunleavy, the last of the founding editors, having retired) should be commended for compiling such a well-balanced collection of articles given the difficulty of commissioning lead-times, at a time of significant political and economic flux, a point they themselves acknowledge as being particularly arduous for the contributors to this edition.

The unique format of the 'developments' series in which each edition brings together an entirely new list of authors means that while some issues such as elections and voting, parliament and political parties and party systems are reviewed in each edition published, new perspectives and recent developments bring a different emphasis or a different methodological approach. This in itself can be used to good effect by the more diligent student, comparing approaches or changes over time. Simultaneously this approach means that this tenth edition includes chapters on issues that were absent from past editions but were prescient at the time of commissioning. In this context, the economic crisis, security and surveillance and changes in executive governance are reviewed. However, where there are winners there are also losers, and consequently issues present in the eighth edition are jettisoned and here the role of the editors really comes to the fore. Some erstwhile topics are easily removed on the basis they have passed into history, an example being a review of 'The Blair style of government'. However, others are overlooked either because they are no longer central to the academic debate, such as 'the politics of multiculturalism', others are not present because the political cycle at the time of publication did not allow empirical conclusions to be drawn. The 'modernising the public services' present in the eighth edition but absent from the ninth must surely reappear in some incarnation as and when the tenth edition is published.

For all the focus on contemporary events, *DinBP* does not utilise new pedagogical techniques, and would benefit from a more interactive format with links, within the text or at the end of each section, to websites or perhaps blogs. Even so, a key feature of *DinBP* remains the breadth and extent of the bibliography, which encompasses standard published works, journal articles and online resources. Indeed, it could be argued that in and of itself it is a major contribution to the study of British politics.

This editorial structure gives the 'development' series a unique place in academic research, acting as a near contemporary commentary of key events. It might be concluded that this focus on contemporary events might quickly consign this edition to obscurity as events develop, however, the academic rigour is such, combined with astute editorial guidance over how chapters are constructed, that each previous edition has retained a place in the academic literature. Indeed by combining chapters in former editions an astute student can construct an almost

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unique ongoing analytical resource of the political system and culture of the United Kingdom. One of the most important attributes of the *DinBP* series has been the academic rigour of the chapters, as such it is an easily accessible portal on the world of current academic thinking for even the most lowly undergraduate, without the need for anything more than a rudimentary understanding of the British political system, there is almost no methodological terminology to inhibit the broader narrative.

However, the focused nature of *DinBP* perhaps marks it out as a supplementary text to go alongside a core textbook on British Politics, rather than a first port of call. For those without a broad knowledge of British Politics a better starting point might be Jones, et. al. (2011) [*Politics UK* (seventh edition) Person: London.] or Moran, M. (2011) [*Politics and governance in the UK*. Palgrave MacMillan: Basingstoke.] Nevertheless, for essay writing or tutorial revision *DinBP* is almost indispensable, especially when analysing recent events rather than looking for a broader historical narrative.

In conclusion, the ninth edition of *DinBP* sits well along side its erstwhile incarnations and there seems little doubt the series will continue, probably with an edition in 2016. The intervening years will have provided a rich seam for future authors to explore, encompassing among other things: a referendum on Scottish independence, a General Election, significant change to public spending particularly with regard to welfare provision and in the delivery of public services, the changing nature of politicians relations with the media and the police as well as the changing relations between the UK and the EU and its position in the wider world. Developments in British Politics 10 should be an equally interesting read as this publication.

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In these reviews I have attempted to outline the key attributes of four books that might be considered among the leaders in their respective fields, examining what I consider to be their main virtues and respective weaknesses. Focus has been on how each publication addresses needs of the new undergraduate meeting political concepts and methods for the first time. However, clearly I am not a new undergraduate and each of us learns in a different way, as such it is always advisable to take some time to look at the broad array of textbooks and other publications available. Textbooks are expensive but a good textbook can enliven academic study. I believe that in their own way each of the above publications do just that and are a good starting point in a degree in comparative politics or the study of political ideas.

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Dr Jonathan Kirkup is Associate Lecturer at the University of the West of England, Bristol and Cardiff University. His areas of research are comparative politics, UK politics and coalition government.

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