Comparative view (Pearson)
Almond et al.

CHAPTER 2

Comparing Political Systems

WHY WE COMPARE

The great French interpreter of American democracy, Alexis de Tocqueville, while on his ravels in America in the 1830s, wrote to a friend about how his ideas about French institutions and culture entered into the writing of *Democracy in America*. Tocqueville wrote "Although I very rarely spoke of France in my book, I did not write one page of it without having her, so to speak, before my eyes."[1] On a more general note about the comparative method, he offered this comment: "Without comparisons to make, the mind does not know how to proceed."[2]

Tocqueville was telling us that comparison is fundamental to all human thought. We add that it is the methodological core of the humanistic and scientific methods as well. It is the only way we can fully understand our own political system. Comparing the past and present of our nation and comparing our experience with that of other nations deepen our understanding of our own institutions. Examining politics in other societies permits us to see a wider range of political alternatives and illuminates the virtues and shortcomings of our own political life. By taking us beyond our familiar arrangements and assumptions, comparative analysis helps expand our awareness of the possibilities of politics.

Comparison is the methodological core of the scientific study of politics. Comparative analysis helps us develop explanations and test theories of the ways in which political processes work and in which political change occurs. Here the logic and the intention of the comparative methods used by political scientists are similar to those used in more exact sciences. Political scientists cannot normally design experiments to control and manipulate political arrangements and observe the consequences, especially when dealing with large-scale events that drastically affect many people. For example, researchers cannot and would not want to start a social revolution to see its effects. Nor would they want to initiate military escalation to see if it leads to war. It is possible, however, to use the comparative method to describe and explain the different combinations of political events and institutions found in different societies. More than two thousand years ago, Aristotle in his *Politics* contrasted the economies and social structures of the many Greek city-states in an effort to determine how the social and economic environment affected political institutions and policies. (See Box 2.1.)

A contemporary political scientist, Robert Dahl, in his studies of democracy, compares the economic characteristics, cultures, and historical experiences of many contemporary nations in an effort to discover the combinations of conditions and characteristics that are associated with that form of government.[3] Other theorists, in their attempt to explain differences between the processes and performance of political systems, have compared constitutional regimes with tyrannies, two-party democracies with multiparty democracies, parliamentary with presidential regimes, and stable governments with unstable ones.

The end of the Cold War left a world engaged in vast experiments in different approaches to economic growth, different strategies for transition to democracy, differing ways of controlling and using the powers of government. Governments today are grappling with new issues of preserving our environment, old issues of opportunity and economic security for citizens, and ancient issues of conflicts of ethnic identities and religious beliefs. In a world made ever smaller by instantaneous communication and

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There is historical evidence that Aristotle had accumulated a library of more than 150 studies of the political systems of the Mediterranean world of 400–300 B.C. Many of these had probably been researched and written by his disciples.

While only the Athenian constitution survives of this library of Aristotelian polities, it is evident from the references to such studies that do survive, that Aristotle was concerned with sampling the variety of political systems then in existence, including the "barbarian" (Third World?) countries such as Libya, Etruria, and Rome: "the references in ancient authorities give us the names of some 70 or more of the states described in the compilation of 'polities.' They range from Sinope, on the Black Sea, to Cyrene in North Africa; they extend from Marseilles in the Western Mediterranean to Crete, Rhodes, and Cyprus in the East. Aristotle thus included colonial constitutions as well as those of metropolitan states. His descriptions embraced states on the Aegean, Ionian, and the Tyrrhenian Seas, and the three continents of Europe, Asia, and Africa."

Source: Ernest Barker, ed., *The Politics of Aristotle* (London: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 386.

interdependent economies, these problems and achievements spill across national boundaries. Comparative analysis is a powerful and versatile tool. It enhances our ability to describe and understand political processes and political change in any country by offering concepts and reference points from a broader perspective. The comparative approach also stimulates us to form general theories of political relationships. It encourages and enables us to test our political theories by confronting them with the experience of many institutions and settings. A primary goal of this book is to provide access to this powerful tool for thought and analysis.

HOW WE COMPARE

We study politics in several different ways: we describe it; we seek to explain it; and sometimes we try to predict it. These are all parts of the scientific process, and in each of them we may use the comparative method. The first stage in the study of politics is description. If we cannot describe a political process or event, we cannot really hope to understand or explain, much less predict what might happen next, or in similar situations. In order to describe politics, we need a set of concepts that are clearly defined and well understood. We speak of this as a conceptual framework. The easier this set of concepts is to understand, and the more generally it can be applied, the more helpful it is to the study of politics. Conceptual frameworks are not generally right or wrong, but they may be more or less useful to the task at hand.

Once we are able to describe politics with the help of the conceptual framework that we choose, the next task is to explain it. What we mean by explaining political phenomena is seeking to identify relationships between them. For example, we might be interested in the relationship between democracy and international peace (Box 2.2). Are democratic states more peaceful than others? If so, are they peaceful because they are democratic, are they democratic because they are peaceful, or are they perhaps both peaceful and democratic because they are more prosperous than other states?

These questions show that we often want explanations to go beyond associating one thing with another. Ideally we want to put many political relationships in causal terms, so that we can say that one political feature is the cause of another, and the latter is the effect of the former. For example, a theory may state that countries are peaceful because they are democratic. There are different kinds of causal statements that we can make about this relationship between war and form of government. One such statement might be "only authoritarian governments start wars"; in other words, authoritarianism is necessary to starting wars. Another statement might be, "all democracies are peaceful"; in other words, democracy is sufficient to guarantee peacefulness. A third statement might express only a tendency or probability, such as "authoritarian governments tend to be more warlike than democracies."

Theories are statements about causal relationships between general classes of events—for exam-

A popular contemporary research program known as *democratic peace research* illustrates the pros and cons of statistical and case study research. It has been of primary interest to international relations scholars, who took the diplomatic history of the Cold War period and asked whether democratic countries are more peaceful in their foreign policy than authoritarian and nondemocratic ones. Many scholars in the democratic peace research group took the statistical route. They counted each year of interaction between two states as one case, and with roughly half a century of diplomatic history involving a state system of 100 countries or more, they had a very large number of cases, even after eliminating the many irrelevant cases of countries that never, or rarely, had any relations with one another. Political scientists Andrew Bennett and Alexander George drew these conclusions after surveying the statistical research:

> Statistical methods achieved important advances on the issue of whether a nonspurious inter-democratic peace exists. A fairly strong though not unanimous consensus emerged that: (1) democracies are not less war-prone in general; (2) they have very rarely if ever fought one another; (3) this pattern of an inter-democratic peace applies to both war and conflicts short of war; (4) states in transition to democracy are more war prone than established democracies; and (5) these correlations were not spuriously brought about by the most obvious alternative explanations.

There is a consensus now, that statistical studies are not as good as are case studies at answering "why" questions. Case studies make clinical depth possible, revealing causal interconnections in individual cases. Careful repetition of these causal tracings from case to case strengthens confidence in these relationships. Thus Bennett and George concluded that the best research strategy to follow is to use statistical and case study methods together, with each one of the methods having its own strengths.

Source: Andrew Bennett and Alexander George, "An Alliance of Statistical and Case Study Methods: Research on the Interdemocratic Peace," APSA-CP: *Newsletter of the APSA Organized Section in Comparative Politics* 9, no. 1: 6.

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ple, about what causes democracy, war, or political development. Theories are always tentative; they are always subject to modification or falsification as our knowledge improves. And theories need to be testable. A good theory is one that holds up after continued trials and experiments, that can be confirmed or modified as we test the theory again and again. The number of cases that political scientists have to generalize about varies from problem to problem. Similarly, the number of cases that are examined when we test theories can vary dramatically.

Researchers in political science distinguish between studies based on large numbers (large "*n*") and small numbers (small "*n*"). Large "*n*" studies are usually referred to as *statistical studies*, small "*n*" as *case studies*. Large "*n*" studies have a sufficient number and variety of cases to enable the researcher to examine the relation among the variables (variables being the dimensions or the parameters on which our cases differ—for example, "form of government: democracy or dictatorship," or "income per capita"). Small "*n*" studies permit investigators to go deeply into a case, identify the particularities of it, get the clinical details, and examine each link in the causal process. In this manner, political scientists may come to know not only whether democracies are more peaceful than dictatorships, but more precisely why democratic leaders behave in the way that they do.

It is now generally recognized that these methods are complementary. Large "*n*" statistical studies allow us to be more certain and precise in our explanations. On the other hand, we need the depth that case studies provide in order to formulate insightful hypotheses for statistical testing in the first place. Also, case study methods can be used to examine in detail some aspects of cause-and-effect relations better than large "*n*" studies.

An example may suggest how you might go about theorizing in comparative politics, going beyond "just mastering the facts." It is well known that rich countries are more likely to be democracies than are poor countries; democracy and economic development are strongly associated. But there are many possible reasons for this association. Some have suggested that comes about because democracy encourages education and economic development. Others have argued that as countries develop economically, their new middle classes or better organized working

class are more likely to demand democratization. Yet others have seen that both democracy and economic development are commonly found in some regions of the world, such as Western Europe, while both tend to be scarce in the Middle East and Africa, suggesting that certain cultures may encourage or discourage both of them. We want to understand the causal nature of this association, for reasons of both science and policy. The recent work of Przeworski and his associates examines the full experience of democracies, nondemocracies, and transitions between them in all parts of the world between 1950 and 1990.[4] Their statistical analysis leads them to conclude that the explanation for the association does not lie in regional effects or superior economic growth in democracy. Moreover, nations at any level of development seem able to introduce democracy. The key to the relationship lies rather in the consistently greater fragility of democracies in societies at lower levels of economic development; democracy can easily be introduced in poor societies with less educated populations, but in these social conditions it is relatively more likely to be replaced by some kind of dictatorship. We still need to understand just why democracy is more precarious in less developed societies, but we have made progress in understanding the causal element in the relationship.

We can also generate and test hypotheses about the causes and consequences of political change by comparing countries at different historical periods, just as we can compare the institutions of different countries in our search for political theories. Tocqueville's study of the French Revolution contributed to a general theory of revolution by comparing pre- and post-revolutionary France.[5] Theda Skocpol based her theories of the causes of revolution on a comparison of the "old regimes" of France, Russia, and China with their revolutionary and post-revolutionary regimes.[6]

SYSTEMS: ENVIRONMENT AND INTERDEPENDENCE

Comparative Politics Today suggests that we approach the comparison of political systems with a structural-functional system framework. To do so, we need to discuss in some detail these three general concepts that we use throughout this book: (1) system, (2) structure, and (3) function. **System**, as we defined it in Chapter 1, suggests an object having moving parts, interacting with a setting or an environment. The **political system** is a set of institutions and agencies concerned with formulating and implementing the collective goals of a society or of groups within it. **Governments** or **states** are the policymaking parts of political systems. The decisions of governments are normally backed up by legitimate coercion, and obedience may be compelled. We discuss legitimacy at greater length in Chapter 3.

Figure 2.1 tells us that a political system exists in both a domestic and an international environment, molding these environments and being molded by them. The system receives **inputs** from these environments and attempts to shape them through its **outputs**. In the figure, which is quite schematic and simple, we use the United States as the central actor, and we include some other countries as our environmental examples—Russia, China, Britain, Germany, Japan, Mexico, and Egypt. Exchanges among countries may vary in many ways. For example, they may be "dense" or "sparse"; United States–Canadian relations exemplify the dense end of the continuum, while United States–Nepalese relations would be at the sparse end. Relationships between political systems may be of many different kinds. The United States has substantial trade relations with some nations and relatively little trade with others. Some countries have an excess of imports over exports, whereas others have an excess of exports over imports. With such countries as the NATO nations, Japan, South Korea, Israel, and Saudi Arabia, military exchanges and support have been of great importance to the United States. The interdependence of nations—the volume and value of imports and exports, transfers of capital, the extent of foreign travel and international communication—has increased enormously in the last decades. We might represent this process as a thickening of the input and output arrows between the United States and other countries in Figure 2.1. Fluctuations in this flow of international transactions and traffic attributable to depression, inflation, protective tariffs, international terrorism, war, and the like may wreak havoc with the economies of the nations affected.

The interaction of the political system with its domestic environment—the economic and social systems and the culture of its citizens—may be illustrated in the American case by the rise of the "high-

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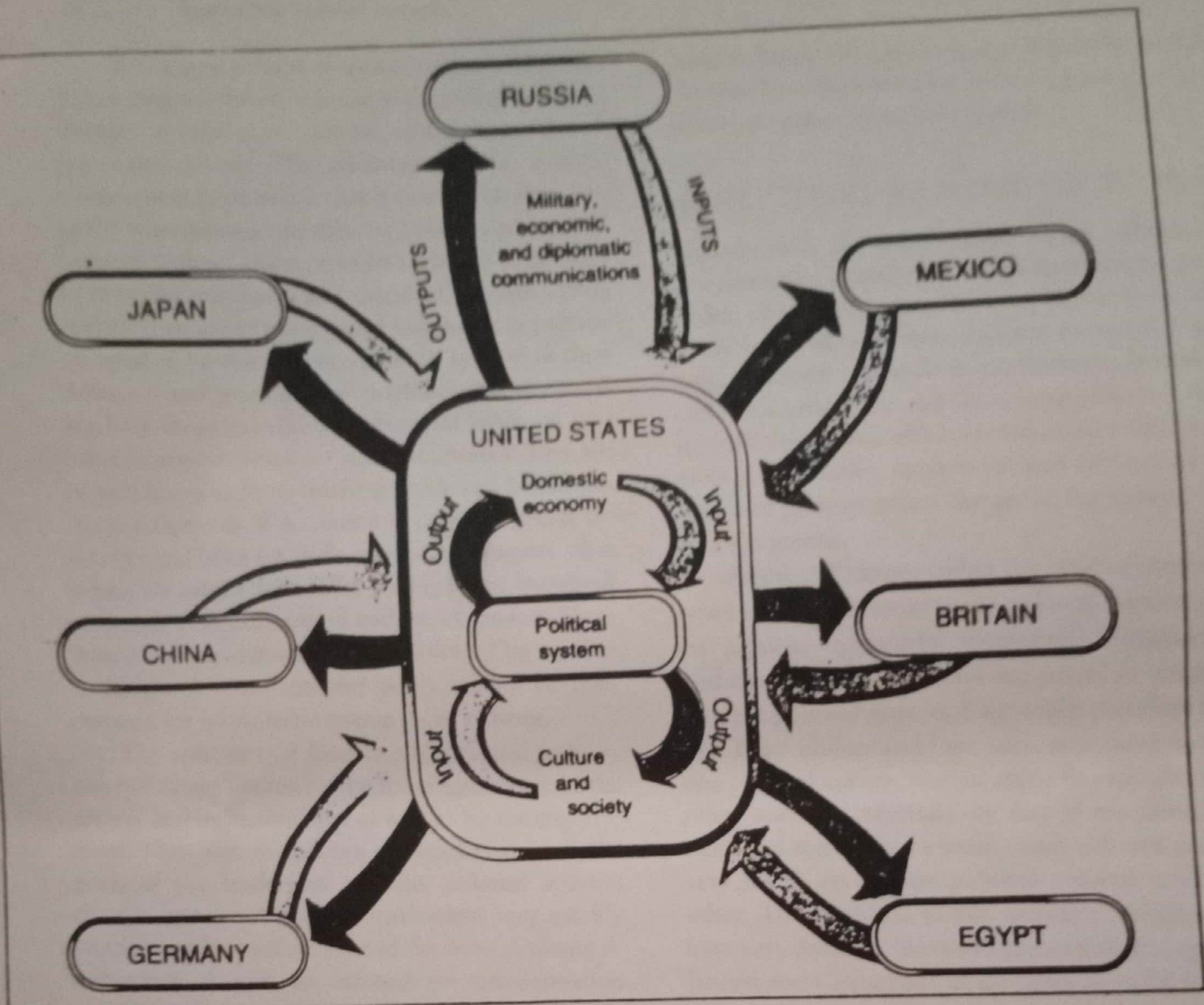

FIGURE 2.1 The Political System and Its Environments

tech information-based economy." The composition of the American labor force, and consequently its citizenry, has changed dramatically in the last century. Agriculture has declined to under 3 percent of the gainfully employed. Employment in heavy extractive and manufacturing industries has decreased substantially, and the newer, high-technology occupations, the professions, and the service occupations have increased sharply as a proportion of the labor force. The last half-century has also witnessed significant improvements in the educational level of the American population, although the quality of education particularly at the primary and secondary levels has come in for very serious criticism in recent years. These and other changes in American social structure have transformed the social bases of the party system. There are now as many independents among American voters as loyal Democrats and Republicans. Workers of the older, primarily European, ethnic stocks have ceased being a solid support for the Democratic Party; they now tend to divide their votes almost equally between the two parties. On the whole, these changes in the labor force have been associated with a more conservative trend in economic policy and with efforts to cut back welfare and other expenditures. A more educated and culturally sophisticated society has become more concerned with the quality of life, the beauty and healthfulness of the environment, and similar issues. In input-output terms, socioeconomic changes have transformed the political demands of the electorate and the kinds of policies that it supports.

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Thus a new pattern of society results in different policy outputs, different kinds and levels of taxation, changes in regulatory patterns, and changes in welfare expenditures. The advantage of the system-environment approach is that it directs our attention to the **interdependence** of what happens within and between nations, and it provides us with a vocabulary to describe, compare, and explain these interacting events. If we are to make sound judgments in politics, we need to be able to place political systems in their domestic and international environments, recognizing how these environments both set limits on and provide opportunities for political choices. This approach keeps us from reaching quick and biased political judgments. If a country is poor in natural resources and lacks the skills necessary to exploit what it has, we cannot fault it for having a low industrial output or poor educational and social services. Similarly, a country dominated and exploited by another country with a conservative policy cannot be condemned for failing to introduce social reforms.

The policies that leaders and political activists can follow are limited by the interdependence of the system and its institutions, as well as by the environment. However, in this era of rapid change, if the goals of the leadership and the political activists change, one set of political institutions may quickly be replaced by another. One of the most dramatic illustrations of such an institutional transformation was the breakdown of control by the Communist parties in Eastern Europe, and their replacement by multiparty systems when the leadership of the Soviet Union lost its confidence in the Soviet system and the future of socialism. Once the Soviet leadership lost confidence in the legitimacy of the Soviet Communist Party, it had no choice but to adopt a permissive and conciliatory policy toward its former satellites.

The notion of interdependence goes even further than this relationship between policy and institutions. The various structural parts of a political system are also interdependent. If a government is based on popularly elected representatives in legislative bodies, then a system of election must be instituted. If many people enjoy the right to vote, then the politicians seeking office will have to mobilize the electorate and organize political parties to carry on election campaigns. As the policymaking agencies of the political system enact laws, they will need administrators and civil servants to implement these laws, and they will need judges to determine whether the laws have been violated and to decide what punishments to impose on the violators.

STRUCTURES AND FUNCTIONS

Governments do many things—from establishing and operating school systems, to maintaining public order, to fighting wars. In order to carry on these many activities, governments have specialized agencies, or **structures**, such as parliaments, bureaucracies, administrative agencies, and courts, which perform **functions**, which in turn enable the government to formulate, implement, and enforce its policies. The policies reflect the goals; the agencies provide the means.

Figure 2.2 locates within the political system six types of political structures—political parties, interest groups, legislatures, executives, bureaucracies, and courts. Such structures are found in almost all modern political systems. One might therefore think that if we understand how such structures work in one political system, we can apply this insight to any other system. Unfortunately that is not always the case, and this sixfold classification will not carry us very far in comparing political systems with each other. The problem is that similar structures may have very different functions across political systems. Britain and China have all six types of political institutions, at least in name; however, these institutions are organized differently in the two countries, and they function in dramatically different ways. Britain has a monarch—currently Elizabeth II—who performs ceremonial functions, like opening Parliament and conferring knighthoods and other honors. China does not have a specialized ceremonial executive. There is, however, a president, elected by the National People's Congress, who performs the ceremonial functions as well as some political functions. The political executive in Britain consists of the prime minister, the ministers assigned to the Cabinet, and the larger ministry, which consists of all the heads of departments and agencies. All these officials are usually selected from Parliament. There is a similar structure in China, called the State Council, headed by a premier and consisting of the various ministers and ministerial commissions. But while the British prime minister and Cabinet have substantial policymaking power, the State Council in China is

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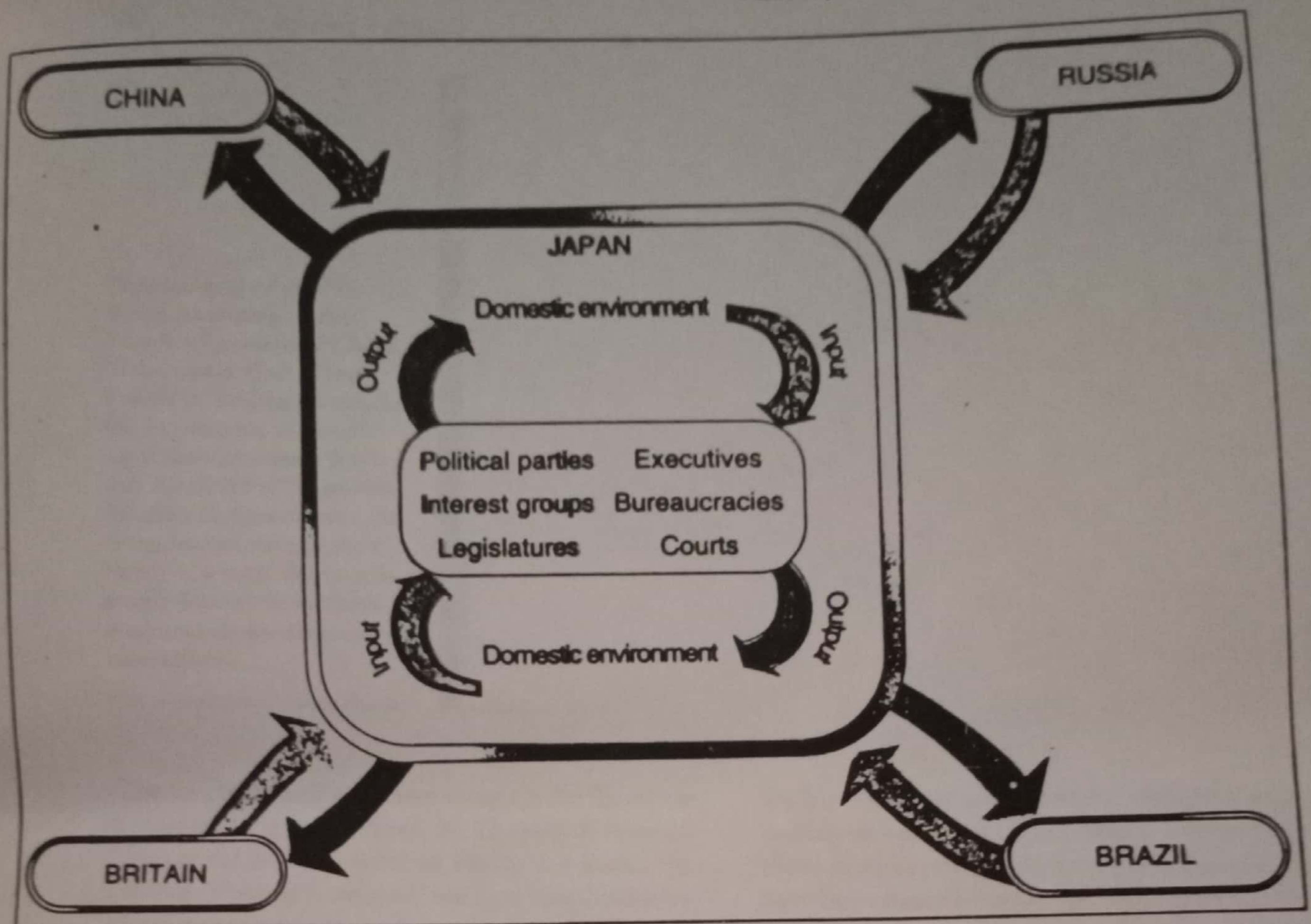

FIGURE 2.2 The Political System and Its Structures

closely supervised by the general secretary of the Communist Party, the Politburo, and the Central Committee of the party. Both Britain and China have legislative bodies—the House of Commons in Britain and the National People's Congress in China. But while the House of Commons is a key institution in the policymaking process, the Chinese Congress meets for only brief periods, ratifying decisions made mainly by the Communist Party authorities.

There are even larger differences between political parties in the two countries. Britain has a competitive party system. The majority in the House of Commons and the Cabinet are constantly confronted by an opposition party or parties, competing for public support and looking forward to the next election when they may unseat the incumbent majority, as happened most recently in 1997, when the Labour Party replaced the Conservatives in government. In China the Communist Party controls the whole political process. There are no other political parties. The principal decisions are taken in the Politburo and to some extent in the Central Committee of the Communist Party. The governmental agencies implement the policies, which have to be initiated and/or approved by the top Communist Party leaders.

British interest groups are autonomous organizations that play important roles in the polity and the economy. Chinese trade unions and other professional organizations have to be viewed as parts of the official apparatus, dominated by the Communist Party, that perform mobilizing, socializing, and facilitating functions. Thus an institution-by-institution comparison of British and Chinese politics that did not spell out functions in detail would not bring us far toward understanding the important differences in the politics of these countries.

Figure 2.3 shows how we relate structure to function and process to policy and performance.

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