

Politics is a messy business, often full of 'grey' areas when one seeks clear answers to the problems of the moment. The complexity of political issues is revealed in most of the chapters of this book. A great deal of politics is, as one ancient philosopher declared, about defining terms and then applying them to society. There is a statement at the beginning of almost every chapter, for example, that warns the reader that this or that concept is 'contested', 'open to considerable debate and argument' or 'a difficult one to grasp'.

Having said so much already about politics as a way of introducing the book, we will look at three fundamental terms – politics, power and justice – and provide an outline of the chapters.

Three fundamental terms: politics, power and justice

There are three fundamental political issues which appear in all the chapters of this book and feature in almost all political discussions and conflicts. These are 'politics', 'power' and 'justice'.

Politics

It may at first sight seem superfluous to define 'politics': the word is in common use and everyone knows what it means. In fact there is more than one way of describing politics and exploration of these different approaches can cast a useful light on the nature of the topic. Supposedly value-free definitions often reveal submerged ideological preconceptions.

Michael Oakeshott, in *Rationalism in Politics* (1962), focuses on the derivation of the word: *politiki* in Greek, *res publicae* in Latin, refers to 'affairs of state'. This superficially straightforward definition implies that there are some things which are *not* 'affairs of state', but belong to the personal, private or civil realm. This is a view that Oakeshott himself held. For Oakeshott, personal and family life was the stuff of existence; ordinary people rightly gave little attention to politics. Liberals, like the traditionalist Oakeshott, identify a private space into which the state has no right to enter. An invasion of this private space by the state appears, to liberals, the essence of tyranny.

In marked contrast, Aristotle famously observed in his *Politics* that 'man is a political animal'; thus, it was entirely appropriate for rational human beings to involve themselves fully in political matters. Totalitarian regimes, like that of the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany, have similarly dismissed all ideas that the individual has a life, with its own value, outside the realm of the political. As the Italian Fascist thinker Giovanni Gentile declared: 'Everything for the state; nothing against the state; nothing outside the state.' Feminist writers also reject distinctions between the political and the personal worlds, as they believe that politics is about power and the most

intense power conflicts and greatest oppression lie precisely in the personal relations of men and women.

In private it is not easy to disentangle the political from the non-political. If the state takes an interest in a matter, then it becomes 'political'. The state's interest can vary dramatically from culture to culture and over the centuries. Some states, for example, impose rigid laws governing dress, recreational activities, sexual relationships and the consumption of alcohol. In other societies these are not believed to be the concern of the state to any great degree. At present, the use of recreational drugs is illegal in Britain but in the future it might cease to be so. Thus what is political may be said to expand and contract depending on whether or not the state involves itself in different aspects of social life.

So far we have assumed, without spelling it out, that the essence of politics is something to do with government. But in ordinary speech it is common to refer to 'office politics', 'college politics', 'church politics', usually pejoratively, and implying machinations.

Bernard Crick's in *In Defence of Politics* (1962), approached the matter from another angle by proposing that politics is a process, a means of resolving conflict by peaceful means. Such conflict may well be at the level of the state but need not be so. Politics can refer to international conflict, 'parish pump' disputes in local government, and industrial strife. Crick assumes differences among people – differences of opinion, differences of values, differences of interests. This, for him, is a basic fact of human existence. Politics deals with this fundamental fact by seeking to resolve the resulting conflicts by rational and peaceful means. Politics requires tolerance, rational discourse, preparedness to compromise, democratically accountable institutions and procedures, and, crucially, an acceptance of an authoritative pronouncement of the outcome. 'Politics' in this sense would be clearly evident in a general election, where parties (with their distinctive programmes, principles and interests) compete in a lawful and orderly manner to obtain votes and so gain dominance in the legislature.

The weakness of this position is that it resembles a sophisticated debating society, and has little application to the real world except perhaps as an ideal of what democratic politics is about. It assumes that politics cannot function except in a liberal democratic context. It thus excludes not only dictatorships and other autocracies but also even the political life of actual democracies where strikes, pressures of all kinds, even perhaps including terrorism, influence events as much as dispassionate dialogues. It is difficult, for instance, to fit the politics of Northern Ireland into Crick's framework. Politics there involves a very wide range of democratic and violent elements that clearly influence both the political culture and the processes in the province.

A more robust approach was that of Harold Lasswell. In *Politics: Who Gets What, When, How?* (1931), Lasswell bluntly asserts that politics is about power and is a study of power relationships. It is the task of political scientists to reveal where power really lies, how it is exercised, by whom and for what purposes.

Attractive though this no-nonsense approach may seem, critics have argued that it is two-dimensional. A third dimension is required and that is 'authority'. This point is persuasively put by David Easton in *The Political System* (1953), where he argues that politics is about the 'authoritative allocation of values'. He makes an important distinction between legislative authority and mere force. A dictator may impose his will by the gun or propaganda but this is not a legitimate use of power. Authoritative politics requires legitimate authority.

There may, of course, be dispute as to what constitutes legitimate authority, and what the sources of such authority are. Max Weber, in *Economy and Society* (1922), described three different types of authority: 'rational legal' (the outcome of accepted procedures such as elections, parliaments, constitutions), 'traditional' (the result of history and custom, such as that of tribal elders, kings and other rules), and 'charismatic' (the product of the personal qualities of a leader). Actual political systems involve more than one of these sources.

For Marxists the whole idea of 'legitimate' politics is a sham. Authority is merely a disguise for power, a disguise invented and manipulated by the ruling class the better to dominate and exploit the proletariat. There is, however, a certain ambiguity in the Marxist position. If politics is an instrument of class oppression, it is also an instrument of class liberation, a component in the struggle by which the workers will eventually overthrow the capitalist class and the instruments of their power. This having been achieved, and communism having been successfully established, 'politics' would cease to exist. Pre-communist politics is interpreted as being about class conflict and material scarcity. Such undesirable conditions will be superseded and fade away together with the instruments of state oppression, government, the army, the police and the judiciary. Presumably there will still be some public discussion on the best course of action in the post-capitalist society but it will not be *politics* as we have known it.

There is a persistent tendency in democracies to regard politics as somehow disreputable, unclean, a 'dirty' business. In part this is due to the perceived dishonesty of politicians, who are all 'in it for themselves', manipulating the electorate by mendacious propaganda, making promises that will not be kept, and general skulduggery. Parties are perceived by a cynical electorate as conspiracies against the public good. Such negative views can be heard in every bar-room in the country. Another strand in this anti-politics thesis, though, appears to be distaste for conflict itself. Even quite sophisticated

commentators sometimes suggest that important national matters, such as education or defence, should be 'outside' or 'above' politics.

Public opinion polls regularly place politicians below estate agents and double-glazing salesmen in terms of trust, a view radically different from the ancient ideal, as enunciated by Aristotle, which did not mean everyone was naturally interested in politics but that participation in public affairs was appropriate to man's dignity and moral identity – an entirely praiseworthy activity.

In the Middle Ages, Saint Augustine, in *The City of God* (413–27), regarded the state and politics as little more than a regrettable necessity ('the badge of Man's lost innocence') and an instrument of maintaining order. Thomas Aquinas, writing in the thirteenth century, claimed a more positive role for the political activity within the state. That role was the promotion of justice. From this perspective, politics may be regarded as a branch of ethics – the study of what is right.

Focusing on morality in politics has been a feature of political ideologies, government decisions and party campaigners to the present day. Discourse on 'ends' or values, and the morality (not just practicality) of 'means' is a fundamental dimension of politics and is inherent in its very meaning. Descriptions of political systems solely in terms of power relationships and the conflict of interests would, from this perspective, seem quite inadequate.

Niccolo Machiavelli, in *The Prince* (1513), explained how to win and hold power. It was a book that notoriously ignored all moral considerations and was justly condemned, according to many modern political scientists, not because it was wicked or untrue but because it was one-dimensional.

Man is unique in being a social animal. Whereas a colony of baboons exhibits, perhaps embarrassingly, many attributes of human society such as hierarchy, conflict, the emergence of leaders, co-operation, even collective action, it lacks rational debate, discussion, compromise, principle, commitment, analysis and justice. Politics is missing, even if power patently exists in baboon society.

Power

Politics is primarily about the acquisition and maintenance of power. Power is inherent in the relationships between individuals, groups, the state and a wide range of what are known as 'actors' in international politics. Power is the underlying concept in political science, a concept that runs through any discussion on the state, the nation, democracy, freedom, equality and the ideologies and movements that mould history. Like the other major concepts and ideologies discussed in this book, the definition of 'power' remains a source of dispute.

At a fundamental level politics is about who gets power, what they do with it, how legitimate is its exercise, and on whom the power is exercised. All thinkers about politics agree that power involves one actor affecting the actions and attitudes of another. As Denis Healey, a leading British Labour politician, once brutally stated: 'Power is the capacity one has to help one's friends and to harm one's enemies.' The existence and use of power is not confined to the world of politics. Power exists wherever there are social relations: within families, between employer and employee, between friends, in the 'sex war' between men and women, and between racial and ethnic groups. Power is everywhere and affects every political calculation. To ignore it or pretend that it doesn't exist is to invite disaster, or at least guarantee that political goals will not be achieved.

Let us now look at some major thinkers and their ideas about power.

Thomas Hobbes

Living through the turmoil of the civil wars in Britain and the Thirty Years' War in Europe, Hobbes was acutely aware of the importance of power in maintaining a stable political system and the terrible consequences when government lacked sufficient power to enforce order and obedience in society. Power to Hobbes was a relationship of cause and effect, between an 'agent' who has power to produce an effect and a 'patient' who is the passive object of that power. Agents seek to satisfy their desires. Mankind, according to Hobbes in *Leviathan* (1651), is involved in 'a perpetuall and restlesse desire of Power after power that ceaseth onely in Death'. Without government, in a state of nature, such a power struggle would lead to a perpetual state of war. Only by establishing an effective supreme power of the sovereign could the chaotic 'state of nature' be brought to an end and peace be established. The legitimacy, the 'right', of the sovereign to rule is founded on the effectiveness with which such order is established and maintained. If a sovereign fails to maintain sufficient power to ensure order then his legitimacy disappears.

Karl Marx

Marx's voluminous writings may all be described as analysing power. He believes power to be a reflection of class and economic relations in society. Marx makes a distinction between the reality of power, as understood in terms of property ownership and the political power that derives from that ownership, and the representation of power as seen in the 'false consciousness' of individuals, groups or classes who believe their perceived interests are the same as their real interests. The state, the legal system, education, religion and the new media are all tools by which the power of the property owning classes over the working classes is upheld.

Max Weber

In *Economy and Society* (1922) Weber defined power as 'the possibility that one actor in a social relationship . . . will carry out his own will' against others who will be resisting. To Weber, power is something one either possesses or does not. Those who have power use it to further their interests and goals over the objections and resistance of others who do not have power. Power is always organised in a hierarchical structure, Weber observes, and its processes are always clear to see, with some people near the top of the hierarchy giving orders to those below them. This will be the case in government and state bureaucracies, businesses and families, with power being demonstrated in various forms of supervision and control by those in charge. The right to exercise power legitimately rests on the authority and status of individuals at different levels within power structures in society. Legitimacy derives from authority conferred by a job title, such as foreman or manager in a factory, and by religious and social mores, such as those that underpin the position of parents within a family.

Steven Lukes

In his *Power: A Radical View* (1974) Lukes identifies a number of approaches to understanding the nature of power.

The 'one-dimensional view' of Robert Dahl in *Who Governs? Democracy and Power in an American City* (1961) and *Modern Political Analysis* (1963) concentrates on decision-making as the central task of politics and the need to identify 'who prevails in the decision-making process' in order to determine which groups and individuals have power in society.

The 'two-dimensional view' of power is discussed by Peter Bachrach and Martin Baratz in *Power and Poverty: Theory and Practice* (1970), who state that power has two 'Janus-like' faces. One face of power is overt and observable; the other is covert or hidden from view. The lack of challenge to overt power may not mean that there is in fact no challenge, but that covert forms of power may be being used very effectively. Thus two-dimensional power involves decision-making and non-decision-making. Decision-making involves choice among a range of possible actions. Non-decision-making is a 'decision that results in suppression or thwarting of a latent or manifest challenge to the values or interests of the decision-maker'. Both clearly involve power.

Lukes stresses the importance of having a 'three-dimensional view' of power. He believes the previous dimensions of power still concentrate on Weber's ideas that power involves individuals realising their will in the face of resistance from others. The first dimension of power, according to Lukes, involves identifying the group or collective nature of decision-making –

'surface details of power' which can easily be observed and which most people believe is what politics is about. However, Lukes claims that the two other dimensions of power are more important. The second dimension involves 'political agenda-setting' and the degree to which government and groups are able to decide what will be discussed, what will become part of the arena of debate. Power is reflected in the ability of politicians and private groups to get issues on to, or keep them off, the political agenda. The third dimension is what Lukes calls the 'bias of the system', the 'socially structured and culturally patterned . . . practices of institutions' that ensure some groups and individuals exercise greater power because they are attuned to these practices, while others find it difficult to succeed against these biases.

Michel Foucault

Foucault argued in many essays during the 1970s, brought together under the title *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings* (1980), that power never rests in the possession of one person, or in any obvious willed manner. It permeates all our minds and directs the way we all act. Within institutions, such as government or a business, power not only flows 'top-down', from higher levels in the institution to the lower, but everyone in an institution exercises some degree of power. The extent to which they can do this depends on what people in the institution regard as 'self-evident truths'. Even in an extremely hierarchical structure, such as government or the armed forces, the ability of the most powerful individuals to get their way can be frustrated by much weaker individuals exercising whatever power they have to obstruct the implementation of policies they disagree with. Power is about the achievement of one's own goals or the prevention of others achieving *their* goals. Power, if effective, enables people to collude in their own subjugation. All have some power and all have some choices as to how to use it. We are influenced in our choices by our knowledge of, or belief in, the opportunities and constraints before us. These constitute an indirect form of self-regulation within systems of power.

Power, however defined, has usually been accompanied by claims that it is being used, or should be used, to ensure 'justice'.

Justice

Justice has been upheld by most political theorists as a vitally important feature of a 'good' political system; so important, in fact, that justice has often been identified as the single most important objective of political activity. Revolutionaries often use 'justice' as a rallying cry to overthrow an 'unjust' political system.

Plato's *Republic* was the first and most important attempt to define justice and what constitutes a just society. Most political philosophy over the past 2500

years has involved discussing the issue of justice raised by Plato in his work, which takes the form of a dialogue between Plato's friend and teacher Socrates and a number of other philosophers. Several ideas of justice are identified, outlined, examined and dismissed. For example, Simonides claims that justice consists of ensuring that everyone is given their due, such as doing good to one's friends and harm to one's enemies (a standpoint which might be immoral and unjust if one's enemies are essentially good men). Thrasymachus defines justice as simply whatever the strongest in society claims it to be. The powerful people control the state; they define justice in terms of their own interests and impose this concept on all others in society. Any other basis of an appeal to justice is simply the weak making feeble attempts to persuade the strong to act against their self-interest. Such a view is always attractive to the powerful, but has little to do with the idea of morality that most thinkers believe should underpin justice. In the *Republic* Plato has Socrates identifying justice as residing in the achievement of harmony between each part in society and each carrying out its social role, the creation of a 'balance' of parts being the basis of both justice and social peace. This is a more refined version of Simonides's idea of justice.

What constitutes 'giving everyone his due' is a useful departure point in the search for the concept of justice and includes both rewards and punishments. Just punishment, for example, involves ensuring that only those found guilty of wrong-doing are punished, that any differences in punishment should correspond to the differences in the wrong-doing, and that the degree of punishment should be appropriate to the offence. Simply imposing order on society is not enough to ensure justice is done.

Most people identify a link between law and justice. A just person is a law-abiding person. Morality is a fundamental underpinning of society and the law reflects this in broad rules about social behaviour and the rights and obligations of people. Justice involves demonstrating respect for these rules. Hence, justice derives from fundamental natural or moral law in society.

Associated with this legally defined view of justice is an essentially conservative desire to preserve a particular social order, an order seen as sustaining justice by giving everyone a legally defined status. Such an idea is rather old fashioned today, and would be condemned as having little to do with modern concepts of justice, but it dominated discussions of the meaning of justice until the eighteenth century. Justice involved accepting inequality in society, as long as each person was given what was appropriate to their status.

Some modern thinkers claim that justice should be a straightforward establishment of respect for law and rights with little reference to 'social justice'. Friedrich von Hayek and Robert Nozick, for example, claim that social justice confuses the issue of justice. It merely encourages the expansion of

state involvement in society in a misplaced desire to achieve social justice. Justice, so Hayek and Nozick argue, is damaged by a growing state presence in every aspect of life, restricting individual liberty without expanding social justice.

During the nineteenth century, justice became connected with 'social justice'. This involves a belief that it is both proper and realistic to bring the pattern of wealth and income distribution, along with education, health and other desirable social goods, into line with principles of justice. Social justice as a concept involves a belief that one can identify the processes by which society is governed and that one can identify a source of power, usually believed to be the government, to bring about social justice (although neo-liberals, for example, claim that the free market can deliver social justice).

Social justice is usually seen as embodying two major elements: firstly, merit and deserts; secondly, need and equality.

Merit and deserts

In a just society, status and rewards should give recognition to merit. Justice challenges any rewards based on hereditary principles and demands the creation of a society in which people can demonstrate their merit. Conservatives see little problem with privilege and hierarchy, as justice is a consequence of order. In a well-ordered society all are rewarded with peace, a peace that emanates from the order created by a widely accepted social hierarchy. Liberals argue for the free market as the most effective mechanism for distributing rewards in society. Price, which reflects the value placed on an individual's products and services, is itself an instrument of justice in a free-market economy and society. Socialists question the degree of justice implicit in the free market. They believe that success in such an economic system has relatively little to do with merit and the justice of rewards: luck and social class determine most rewards in society.

Need and equality

This element of justice involves the distribution of material rewards among people according to need and is greatly influenced by ideas of equality. The problem here is the great difficulty in distinguishing 'need' from simple 'desire'. The former is an important, even vital, aspect of life (involving food, shelter, clothing and warmth), while the latter consists largely of frivolous non-essentials (there are almost infinite examples of these).

The issue of 'need' is, because of its close association with equality, a strong part of socialist views of justice. Marxism, for example, allows people the full attainment of their needs, while social democracy claims that needs will vary

in accordance with the available resources and the existing standards of need in a society. In Western societies this element of justice is identified with the equality of basic needs fulfilled by welfare states.

Other thinkers base claims for social justice on different criteria. Jeremy Bentham and the Utilitarians, for example, claimed that social justice was associated with the distribution of goods and services that generate the greatest degree of happiness. The production of happiness may or may not require egalitarian social policies. John Rawls, in *A Theory of Justice* (1971), argued that social justice does not automatically involve social equality. He argues for everyone having access to an extensive system of equal liberties and opportunities. An unequal distribution of goods and services may be quite compatible with justice if the least well-off in society benefit from it in some way. The provision of incentives to stimulate individual effort, for example, involves unequal rewards but if they help raise the overall wealth in society all, including the very poor, will benefit.

Justice is, along with power, a key underlying theme of our book. Let us now look at the topics covered.

An outline of the chapters

In most of the topics under discussion here we make reference to some of the major political thinkers and writers and to their most important works. We identify some of the basic concepts around which political discourse is structured. This is not an exhaustive compendium, neither are these chapters by any means the last word on key concepts and movements. We hope that there is enough in this book to whet the appetite, to stir the interest, of the reader and to encourage further study of the many excellent books, articles and seminal writing mentioned.

The first few chapters will identify and discuss some key concepts involved in political theory and debate, such as the state, the nation, liberty, equality, democracy, rights, which form the underpinning for the ideologies and movements discussed in the rest of the book.

1 The state and sovereignty

The state is arguably the most important concept in political theory. We introduce you to the main features of the state: territoriality, longevity, a power structure and sovereignty. The second part of the chapter assesses the degree to which the state and state sovereignty are disappearing in the modern world of 'globalised' politics, economics and culture and new international institutions.