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1

What is Political Theory?

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- DEFINING POLITICAL THEORY
Politics as science, philosophy and theory • Political theory in transition
 - USES AND ABUSES OF POLITICAL CONCEPTS
Normative and descriptive concepts • Contested concepts • Words and things
 - HOW TO USE THIS BOOK
-

Preview

It would be misleading, indeed patently foolish, to suggest that political conflict reflects nothing more than confusion in the words we use. It is certainly true that enemies often argue, fight and even go to war, both claiming to be 'defending liberty' or 'upholding democracy', or that 'justice is on our side'. The intervention of some Great Lexicographer descending from the skies to demand that the parties to the dispute define their terms before they proceed, stating precisely what each means by 'liberty', 'democracy' and 'justice', would surely be to no avail. The argument, fight or war would take place anyway. Politics, in other words, can never be reduced to mere semantics. And yet there is also a sense in which sloppiness in the use of language may help to protect ignorance and preserve misunderstanding. Language is both a tool with which we think and a means by which we communicate with others. If the language we use is confused or poorly understood, it is not only difficult to express our views and opinions with any degree of accuracy but it is also impossible to know the contents of our own minds.

The least, and some would say the most, we can do is be clear about the words we use and the meanings we assign to them. The goal is the one George Orwell outlined in his seminal essay, 'Politics and the English Language' (1957): language should be 'an instrument for expressing and not concealing or preventing thought'. This book sets out to clarify and examine the major ideas, concepts and doctrines used in political analysis, and, in so doing, to provide an introduction to some of the most recurrent controversies in political theory. This introductory chapter discusses the nature and parameters of political theory, and explores some of the difficulties encountered in the study of political concepts. How does political theory differ from both political science and political philosophy? Why are political concepts so often the subject of intellectual and ideological controversy?

Defining political theory: Politics as science, philosophy and theory

The study of politics is usually seen to encompass two, and some would say three, distinct subdivisions. On the one hand, there is what is called political science and, on the other, political theory and political philosophy – terms that are often used interchangeably but between which distinctions are sometimes drawn. Although political science was a child of the twentieth century, it drew on roots which date back to the empiricism of the seventeenth century. ‘Science’ refers to a means of acquiring knowledge through observation, experimentation and measurement. Its central feature, the ‘scientific method’, involves verifying or falsifying hypotheses by testing them against empirical evidence, preferably using repeatable experiments. The almost unquestioned status which science has come to enjoy in the modern world is based on its claim to be objective and value-free, and so to be the only reliable means of disclosing truth. Political science is therefore essentially empirical, claiming to describe, analyze and explain government and other political institutions in a rigorous and impartial manner. The high point of enthusiasm for a ‘science of politics’ came in the 1950s and 1960s with the emergence, most strongly in the USA, of a form of political analysis that drew heavily on behaviouralism. Behaviouralism developed as a school of psychology (known as behaviourism) which, as the name implies, studies only the observable and measurable behaviour of human beings. This encouraged political analysts such as David Easton (1979, 1981) to believe that political science could adopt the methodology of the natural sciences, leading to a proliferation of studies in areas like voting behaviour where systematic and quantifiable data were readily available.

Political theory and political philosophy may overlap, but a difference of emphasis can nevertheless be identified. Anything from a plan to a piece of abstract knowledge can be described as a ‘theory’. In academic discourse, however, a theory is an explanatory proposition, an idea or set of ideas that in some way seeks to impose order or meaning on phenomena. As such, all enquiry proceeds through the construction of theories, sometimes thought of as hypotheses – that is, explanatory propositions waiting to be tested. Political science, no less than the natural sciences and other social sciences, therefore has an important theoretical component. For example, theories, such as that social class is the principal determinant of voting behaviour, or that revolutions occur at times of rising expectations, are essential if sense is to be made of empirical evidence. This is what is called empirical political theory.

Political theory is, however, usually regarded as a distinctive approach to the subject, even though, particularly in the USA, it is seen as a subfield of political science. Political theory involves the analytical study of ideas and concepts that

have been central to political thought. Traditionally, this has taken the form of a history of political thought, focusing on a collection of ‘major’ thinkers – from, for instance, Plato to Marx – and a canon of ‘classic’ texts, an approach once widely seen as *the* defining aspect of the discipline of politics. As it studies the ends and means of political action, political theory is clearly concerned with ethical or normative questions, such as ‘Why should I obey the state?’, ‘How should rewards be distributed?’ and ‘What should be the limits of individual liberty?’ This traditional approach has about it the character of literary analysis: it is primarily interested in examining what major thinkers said, how they developed or justified their views, and the intellectual context in which they worked.

An alternative approach has been called formal political theory. This draws on the example of economic theory in building up models based on procedural rules, usually about the rationally self-interested behaviour of the individuals involved. Most firmly established in the USA and associated in particular with the Virginia School, formal political theory has attempted to understand better the behaviour of actors like voters, politicians, lobbyists and bureaucrats, and has spawned ‘rational choice’, ‘public choice’ and ‘social choice’ schools of thought (see p. 168). Although its proponents believe it to be strictly neutral, its individualist and egoistical assumptions have led some to suggest that it has an inbuilt bias towards conservative values.

The term ‘political philosophy’ can be used loosely to cover any abstract thought about politics, law or society – philosophy being, in general terms, the search for wisdom and understanding. However, philosophy has also been seen more specifically as a *second-order* discipline, in contrast to *first-order* disciplines which deal with empirical subjects. In other words, philosophy is not so much concerned with revealing truth in the manner of science, as with asking secondary questions about how knowledge is acquired and how understanding is expressed. For instance, whereas a political scientist may examine the democratic processes at work within a particular system, a political philosopher will be interested in clarifying what is meant by ‘democracy’. Political philosophy therefore addresses itself to two main tasks. First, it is concerned with the critical evaluation of political beliefs, paying attention to both inductive and deductive forms of reasoning. Second, it attempts to clarify and refine the concepts employed in political discourse. What this means is that, despite the best efforts of political philosophers to remain impartial and objective, they are inevitably concerned with justifying certain political viewpoints at the expense of others and with upholding a particular understanding of a concept rather than alternative ones. From this point of view, the present book can be seen primarily as a work of political theory and not political philosophy. Although the writings of political philosophers provide much of its material, its objective is to analyze and explain political ideas and concepts rather than advance any particular beliefs or interpretations.

Political theory in transition

Western political thought has gone through various phases of development since its inception in classical or ancient times (see Table 1.1). However, since its revival in the 1970s, following a period during which an almost unquestioned faith in science was often taken to imply that normative theorizing is meaningless, political theory has been reshaped in a number of ways. In the first place, modern political theory tends to place a greater emphasis than did earlier manifestations on the role of history and culture in structuring political understanding. This implies, for instance, that what, say, Plato (see p. 22), Rousseau (see p. 165) or Marx (see p. 317) wrote may tell us more about the societies in which they lived than it does about supposedly timeless political and moral issues. While few would conclude from this that the study of 'major' thinkers and 'classic' texts is worthless, most now accept that any interpretation of theories and beliefs developed in the past must take account of the context in which they were generated, as well as of the extent to which any such interpretations are entangled with our own values and assumptions. Second, political theory has become increasingly diffuse and fragmented in character. From the early modern period onwards, political thought acquired an unmistakably liberal character, to such an extent that liberalism (see p. 18) and political theory came to be virtually coextensive. However, since the 1960s, a range of rival political traditions have emerged as critiques of, or alternatives to, liberal theory, examples including radical feminism (see p. 56), communitarianism (see p. 33), green politics (see p. 218) and multiculturalism (see p. 178). Growing interest in non-Western political traditions is also evidence of this trend, as is the wider acceptance that no tradition possesses a monopoly of political wisdom.

Third, conventional political theory has been challenged by the emergence of an 'anti-foundationalist' critique that questions the rationalism that lay at its heart. Most clearly linked to postmodernism (see p. 119), but also associated, albeit in different ways, with traditions such as feminism, critical theory (see p. 116) and postcolonialism (see p. 214), anti-foundationalism emphasizes the contingent nature of all principles, doctrines and theories, based on the belief that there is no moral and rational high point from which they can be judged. This has been reflected in, amongst other things, a change in the way that theory has been used. Instead of using it as a device for analyzing or explaining events (empirical theory), or as a means of defining our ethical horizons (normative theory), anti-foundationalist theorists use theory as a way of widening or deepening our perceptual field ('interpretive' theory), in the belief that that the 'real world' is, in an important sense, constituted *through* theory. Finally, political theory has attempted, in various ways, to come to terms with the heightened interdependence that 'accelerated' globalization has brought, particularly since the 1980s. This has meant, for example, that political theory's tendency to frame

Table 1.1 The development of Western political thought

<i>Period</i>	<i>Thinkers</i>	<i>Common themes</i>
Classical/Ancient	Thucydides Plato Aristotle Cicero	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ideal society • Justice • City-state • Citizenship
Medieval (<i>circa</i> 500–1500)	Augustine John of Salisbury Thomas Aquinas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Christian politics • True republic • Natural law • Just war
Early modern (<i>circa</i> 1500–1789)	Niccolò Machiavelli Thomas Hobbes John Locke C.-L. Montesquieu J.-J. Rousseau	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sovereignty • The state • Natural rights • Political obligation • Republicanism • Constitutionalism
Modern (after 1789)	Edmund Burke Karl Marx John Stuart Mill James Madison Friedrich Nietzsche	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Liberty • Equality • Nationalism • Capitalism • Socialism • Democracy
Contemporary (since 1970s)	John Rawls Robert Nozick Michel Foucault Jürgen Habermas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Free market • Gender • Culture • Identity • Diversity • Global justice

issues and problems in the context of the nation-state has been modified by a growing awareness of the phenomenon of ‘transnationalism’ (addressed in Chapter 4). Another response to heightened interdependence involves attempts to ‘think globally’, either by recasting political ideas and concepts by placing them in a world or global framework (as in the case of ‘global justice’, ‘world society’, ‘global citizenship’ and so on), or by exploring the possibility of redefining political community on a cosmopolitan basis (see p. 105).

Uses and abuses of political concepts

This book examines political theory by exploring the use and significance of key political concepts, clustered into related groups. However, concepts are

often slippery customers, and this is particularly the case in relation to political concepts. In its simplest sense, a concept is a general idea about something, usually expressed in a single word or a short phrase. A concept is more than a proper noun or the name of a thing. There is, for example, a difference between talking about a cat (a particular and unique cat) and having a general concept of a 'cat'. The concept of a cat is not a 'thing' but an 'idea', an idea composed of the various attributes that give a cat its distinctive character – 'a furry mammal', 'small', 'domesticated', 'catches mice', and so on. Concepts are therefore 'general' in the sense that they can refer to a number of objects, indeed to any object that complies with the general idea itself.

Concept formation is an essential step in the process of reasoning. Concepts are the tools with which we think, criticize, argue, explain and analyze. Merely perceiving the external world does not in itself give us knowledge about it. In order to make sense of the world we must, in a sense, impose meaning on it, and we do this through the construction of concepts. Quite simply, to treat a cat as a cat, we must first have a concept of what it is. Precisely the same applies to the process of political reasoning: we build up our knowledge of the political world not simply by looking at it, but by developing and refining concepts which help us make sense of it. Political concepts are therefore political thought's basic units of meaning. A series of difficulties nevertheless beset political concepts.

Normative and descriptive concepts

The first problem encountered with political concepts is that they are often, and some would argue always, difficult to disentangle from the moral and philosophical views of those who advance them. This is explicitly acknowledged in the case of prescriptive or normative concepts, usually categorized as 'values'. Values refer to moral principles or ideals: that which *should*, *ought to* or *must* be brought about. Examples of political values include 'justice', 'liberty', 'human rights', 'equality' and 'toleration'. By contrast, another range of concepts, usually termed descriptive or positive concepts, are supposedly more securely anchored in that they refer to 'facts' which have an objective and demonstrable existence: they refer to what *is*. Concepts such as 'power', 'authority', 'order' and 'law' are categorized in this sense as descriptive rather than normative. As facts can be proved to be either true or false, descriptive concepts are often portrayed as neutral or value-free.

However, in politics, facts and values are invariably interlinked, and even apparently descriptive concepts tend to be loaded with moral and ideological implications. This can be seen, for instance, in the case of 'authority'. If authority

is defined as ‘the right to influence the behaviour of others’, it is certainly possible to use the concept descriptively to say who possesses authority and who does not, and to examine the basis on which it is exercised. Nevertheless, it is impossible completely to divorce the concept from value judgements about when, how and why authority *should* be exercised. In short, no one is neutral about authority. For example, whereas conservatives, who emphasize the importance of order and discipline, tend to regard authority as rightful and healthy, anarchists, who believe all systems of rule to be intrinsically corrupt, reject authority as nakedly oppressive. All political concepts, descriptive as well as normative, therefore need to be understood in the light of the ideological perspective of those who use them.

Contested concepts

A further problem is that political concepts often become the subject of intellectual and ideological controversy. Politics is, in part, a struggle over the legitimate meaning of terms and concepts. This is reflected in attempts to establish a particular conception of a concept as objectively correct, as in the case of *true* democracy, *true* freedom, *true* justice and so on. A way out of this dilemma was suggested by W.B. Gallie (1955/6), who suggested that in the case of concepts such as ‘power’, ‘justice’ and ‘freedom’ controversy runs so deep that no neutral or settled definition can ever be developed. These concepts should be recognized, he argued, as ‘essentially contested concepts’. In effect, each term encompasses a number of rival concepts, none of which can be accepted as its ‘true’ meaning. To acknowledge that a concept is ‘essentially contested’ is not, however, to abandon the attempt to understand it, but rather to recognize that competing versions of the concept may be equally valid.

This view has, however, been subject to two forms of criticism (Ball, 1988). First, many theorists who attempt to apply Gallie’s insights (see, for example, Lukes (2005) in relation to ‘power’) continue to defend their preferred interpretation of a concept against its rivals. This refusal to accept that all versions of the concept are equally valid produces ongoing debate and argument which could, at some stage in the future, lead to the emergence of a single, agreed concept. Second, certain concepts are now contested which were once the subject of widespread agreement. For instance, the wide-ranging and deep disagreement that currently surrounds ‘democracy’ only emerged from the late eighteenth century onwards alongside new forms of ideological thinking. As a result, it is perhaps better to treat contested concepts as ‘currently’ contested (Birch, 2007) or as ‘contingently’ contested (Ball, 1997).

Words and things

The final problem with political concepts is what may be called the fetishism of concepts. This occurs when concepts are treated as though they have a concrete existence separate from, and, in some senses, holding sway over, the human beings who use them. In short, words are treated as things, rather than as devices for understanding things. The German sociologist Max Weber (1864–1920) attempted to deal with the problem of the limited explanatory power of concepts by classifying particular terms as ‘ideal types’. An ideal type is a mental construct in which an attempt is made to draw out meaning from an otherwise almost infinitely complex reality through the presentation of a logical extreme. Ideal types are therefore explanatory tools, not approximations of reality; they neither ‘exhaust reality’ nor do they offer an ethical ideal. Concepts such as ‘democracy’, ‘human rights’ and ‘capitalism’ are thus more rounded and coherent than the unshapely realities they seek to describe. Weber himself treated ‘authority’ and ‘bureaucracy’ as ideal types. The importance of recognizing particular concepts as ideal types is that it underlines the fact that concepts are only analytical tools. For this reason, it is better to think of concepts or ideal types not as being ‘true’ or ‘false’, but merely as more or less ‘useful’.

Further attempts to emphasize the contingent nature of political concepts have, as noted earlier, been associated with postmodernism and other forms of anti-foundationalism. These have rejected the ‘traditional’ search for universal values acceptable to everyone, arguing instead that there is a plurality of legitimate ethical and political positions, and that our language and political concepts are valid only in terms of the context in which they are generated and employed. In its extreme version, as, for example, advanced in the ‘deconstructive’ writings of Jacques Derrida (see p. 120), it is an illusion to believe that language, and therefore concepts, can in any sense be said to ‘fit’ the world. All we can do, from this perspective, is to recognize how reality is constructed by and for us through our language; as Derrida put it, ‘there is nothing outside the text’. However, perhaps the most radical critique of concepts is developed in the philosophy of Mahayana Buddhism. This distinguishes between ‘conventional’ truth, which constitutes nothing more than a literary convention in that it is based on a willingness among people to use concepts in a particular way, and ‘absolute’ truth, which involves the penetration of reality through direct experience and so transcends conceptualization. In this view, thinking of all kinds amounts to a projection imposed on reality, and therefore constitutes a form of delusion. If we mistake words for things we are in danger, as the Zen saying puts it, of mistaking the finger pointing at the moon for the moon itself.

How to use this book

This book provides an introduction to political theory by considering the major concepts and ideas around which political debate and argument have revolved. It therefore reflects on how the terms have been used and the meanings that have been assigned to them, as well as the role they have played in political thought. The concepts discussed are grouped into sets of three interrelated terms to enable each chapter to deal with a distinctive theme, the nature of which is outlined in the Preview. The ordering of the chapters nevertheless conforms to an unfolding logic, as explained below.

The first group of chapters analyzes concepts that can be thought of as foundational within political theory; these concepts relate to cornerstone debates and issues within the field:

- Chapter 2 examines the relationship between the individual and society, a theme touched on in almost all political debates and controversies and one that is typically linked to competing models of human nature.
- Chapter 3 focuses on how and why politics differs from other activities, and considers the parameters of ‘the political’, particularly by reflecting on the nature and significance of government and the state.
- Chapter 4 discusses the territorial configuration of political rule, considering why political rule is so often associated with claims about sovereignty and national identity, as well as how far the nation has been subverted by rising transnationalism.
- Chapter 5 examines issues related to how, and on what basis, people influence one another, reflecting on whether this is done through the exercise of power or the exercise of authority, and how far each is able to establish legitimacy.

The next group of chapters focuses on issues and concepts that have provoked recurrent political debate, constituting the stock themes of political theory:

- Chapter 6 discusses who should rule, looking especially at democracy and the notion of popular rule, together with the related ideas of representation and the public interest.
- Chapter 7 considers the nature and role of law, reflecting on the extent to which law is required to ensure order, as well as the complex issue of the relationship between law and justice.
- Chapter 8 examines debates concerning the proper relationship between the individual and the state, especially as these relate to the interlocking ideas of rights, obligations and citizenship.

- Chapter 9 discusses the nature, and proper extent, of freedom, and also focuses on issues that can be seen as manifestations of freedom, notably toleration and identity.
- Chapter 10 considers the nature and implications of equality, reflecting in particular on debates about social justice and welfare, and thus on the issue of the proper distribution of wealth or material rewards in society.

The final group of chapters considers a range of wider issues and themes that, nevertheless, fall within the parameters of political theory:

- Chapter 11 considers the theme of political economy by discussing competing notions of property distribution and the rival merits of the two key forms of economic organization: the market and planning.
- Chapter 12 considers theoretical issues in the field of international politics, examining debates about the issues of security and war, and considering competing models of twenty-first-century world order.
- Chapter 13 concludes the book by reflecting on the issue of political change and thus the linkage between theory and practice, and by focusing on the contrasting ideas of tradition, progress and utopia.

Throughout the book, additional material is provided through boxed features. Each of these has a particular role and purpose.

- **‘Tradition’ boxes**

These provide an introduction to the major approaches to, or perspectives on, political theory, each offering a distinctive ‘lens’ on the political world. These traditions not only shape our understanding of political concepts but also structure political argument and debate across a range of issues. Many may be classified as ‘ideologies’, in that they are aligned to determinate political ends.

- **‘Thinker’ boxes**

These provide brief biographical information about major figures in political thought and discuss the nature and significance of their contribution to political theory. An overview of the ideas of other key theorists can be found at the end of each tradition box.

- **‘Thinking globally’ boxes**

These reflect on where, how and how meaningfully key political ideas and concepts have been revised in the light of globalizing tendencies. They therefore examine how political theory is adapting in the light of the challenge of increased interconnectedness, as well as how far it should adapt.

- **'Beyond the West' boxes**

These attempt to temper the essentially Western approach to political theory adopted in the book by examining particular non-Western approaches to an issue or topic under consideration. The purpose of contrasting Western and non-Western thought is to help to deepen our grasp of the former, while stimulating reflection on what may be learnt from the latter.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- In what sense does political science have a theoretical component?
- Should political theory be viewed as a subfield of political science?
- How does political theory differ from political philosophy?
- What is a concept?
- In what sense are political concepts political thought's basic units of meaning?
- To what extent can a distinction be made between descriptive concepts and normative concepts?
- Why are political concepts so often the subject of intellectual and ideological controversy?
- Is it helpful to treat certain political concepts as 'essentially' contested?
- What are the implications of regarding particular concepts as 'ideal types'?
- What has postmodernism contributed to our understanding of political concepts?

FURTHER READING

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