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WHAT IS POLITICS?

Politics is a many-sided activity which is impervious to one simple definition. A crucial question is to ask what are the boundaries of the political? Should we draw them narrowly, at the risk of rejecting much of what might fairly be described as politics, or should we draw them widely, at the risk of diluting the term to the point of meaninglessness?

Definitional rigour is not helped by the fact that politics is often popularly regarded in a pejorative sense, associated with corruption, intrigue, and conflict. The close association of politics with power, or more especially the abuse of power, compounds the negative associations, as does the perception that many politicians in the contemporary period are only 'in it for themselves'. US President Trump's promise, made during his 2016 election campaign, to 'drain the swamp' of Washington DC initially referred to conflicts of interest created by the political lobbying industry, but the phrase also stands as a more general metaphor, at least for Trump supporters, for almost everything that appears to be wrong at the centre of American politics.

One commentator has noted that the popular association of politics with the apparent pursuit of the material self-interest of politicians in the contemporary period is 'oddly antithetical to its very *raison d'etre*'—that is the realization of the 'collective good' (Hay, 2002: 3). Most contemporary politicians would say that this is actually what motivated them to seek public office in the first place, and there is no doubt that many do genuinely believe that it lies at the heart of their calling. The view of politics as essential to the realization of a common or collective good has appeared in the work of political thinkers from the ancient Greeks onwards.

In the ancient and pre-modern periods, in addition to Aristotle, political philosophers such as Plato (427–327 BC), Cicero (106–43 BC), St Augustine of Hippo (354–430), and St Thomas Aquinas (1225–74) all articulated conceptions of the common good, and highlighted the task of politics in achieving this. In the Arab/Muslim world, too, philosophers such as Ibn Rushd (1126–98) saw the purpose of government and politics as creating the conditions for the pursuit of the good life while much of classical Hindu political philosophy in South Asia and the Confucian tradition of thought in East Asia centred on similar themes. In the modern period, political philosophers such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–78) and John Stuart Mill (1806–73) regarded participation in political life as an honourable activity that ought to be encouraged. The essentially noble purpose of politics is therefore evident in a broad range of philosophical traditions. Here, it is interesting to note that in the ancient Greek world, the term *idiotes* (idiot) referred specifically to a citizen who took no interest in the affairs of the polis.

The pejorative critique of politics actually provides, though, a clue to what politics is about. For it might be argued that politics is associated with adversarial behaviour precisely because it reflects the conflictual nature of society, or, to use a less value-laden term, the fact that all societies of any complexity contain a range of different interests and values. Indeed, one popular definition of politics is that it is the process by which groups representing divergent interests and values make collective decisions. There are two assumptions here. The first is that all societies of any complexity must contain diversity, that humans will always have different interests and values, and therefore there will always be a need for a mechanism whereby these different interests and values are reconciled. The second assumption is that scarcity is also an inevitable characteristic of all societies. Since there is not enough to go around of the goods that people want, there needs to be some mechanism whereby these goods can be distributed.

Politics would seem, then, in the words of the American political scientist Harold Lasswell (1936), to be about 'Who Gets What, When, How?' Clearly, of great importance here is the way in which economic goods are distributed, as these are crucially important in determining the nature of society and the well-being of those who live within it. As we shall see in Chapter 5, competing theories of distributive justice focus on a particular ordering of economic goods. However, there are other goods that humans value. Status, for instance, is seen to be particularly important. For most people, for example, the granting of an honour, whether by the state or an organization within **civil society**, is regarded as valuable, even though no monetary reward is attached to it.

The study of politics prior to the nineteenth century was almost exclusively concerned with a study of values; that is, politics was equated with philosophy. Political philosophers asked, what is the good life? What, in other words, is the best kind of society for us to live in? Many different answers to this question have been provided but, as Stoker (2006: 6) points out, a 'central divide for much of the last two centuries has been between those who prefer liberty over equality and those who prefer equality over liberty'. This of course raises the question of the balance between the two. In the present period, there is evidence of a widening gap between rich and poor in many countries. Of equal importance in the twenty-first century is the conflict between liberty and the value of security—a theme which has become increasingly prominent in the wake of '9/11' and the heightened sense of threat from terror attacks.

IS POLITICS INEVITABLE?

If we define politics in terms of differences, conflicts, and scarcity, then it might be, and has by many been suggested, that politics is an inevitable feature of all societies. Not all agree with this. For some, such a claim seriously underestimates the possibility of greater social cohesion based around agreement on core values. Marxists, in particular, suggest that, since differences of interests in society centre on the existence of competing social classes, the creation of a classless society offers the prospect of a society based on consensus and cooperation, one in which politics and the state are not necessary.

Politics, for Marx then, is seen in negative terms. It is about class conflict. Political power, as Marx and Engels famously insisted in the *Communist Manifesto* (1976: 105), is 'merely the organised power of one class for oppressing another'. It logically follows from this that, once that conflict is ended through the overthrow of capitalism, there are no competing classes and therefore, by definition, no politics. For others, this Marxist vision is unrealistic—'ideal fancy' in Berlin's words (1969: 118) since it fails to take into account **human nature**'s tendency towards difference, striving, and competition.

Other, more recent versions of the 'end of politics' are associated with the 'end of ideology' and 'end of history' theses proposed by Daniel Bell (1960) and Francis Fukuyama (1992) respectively. An argument common to both is that in the post-1945 period, liberal democratic values gradually assumed a position of dominance across the world. This appeared to be confirmed by the collapse of communism as a viable economic and political system in 1989. However, whilst it is true that the Cold War is now a thing of the past, that communism in Russia and Eastern Europe has been dismantled, and that growing affluence in the West has made it more difficult for left-of-centre parties to garner political support, it simply does not follow that we have reached the end of ideology, let alone history.

→ See Chapter 2 for a discussion of human nature.

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A cursory glance at world affairs seems to put this end of ideology thesis to the sword. As this book will reveal, in the world there are a number of alternatives to the liberal democratic model. Some of these alternatives have similarities with Western liberal democracy but also significant differences. The post-communist regimes of Eastern Europe, for instance, operate very differently because of their limited experience of democratic norms. Many East Asian regimes (such as China, Malaysia, Singapore, and so on) have put a greater focus on economic development, sometimes at the expense of civil liberty and democratic procedures. The difficulty of establishing liberal democratic principles in Iraq is also indicative of the limited application of the end of history approach. Finally, other alternatives are obviously completely different from the Western liberal democratic model. This applies to military regimes, often found in Africa, and Islamic regimes, particularly of the fundamentalist variety as in Iran, that put religious norms before liberty and democracy. The fact that some authoritarian regimes, such as China, have experienced rapid economic growth belies the claim that there is a causal relationship between prosperity and the existence of liberal democratic values and institutions (Dryzek and Dunleavy, 2009: 335).

Many fundamental conflicts remain in the world that require political resolution. Some are based on territory, others are based on political values, the most insoluble containing elements of both. Here, the uncompromising ideology of **nationalism** is all too apparent. The Israel/Palestine conflict, in which competing nationalisms make apparently irreconcilable claims, is one such case. And there have been cases in Western Europe where resort to violence has only recently been eliminated, as in Northern Ireland and the Basque country of Spain. Widely divergent views over such issues as immigration and multiculturalism have also generated much conflict as has the emergence of **identity politics.** As Gamble (2000: 108) points out, 'The notion that there are no longer any great ideological issues in the world . . . becomes bizarre in relation to the vast populations . . . in Africa, in Asia, in Latin America and in the former territories of the Soviet Union' who live under regimes that do not subscribe to all, or some, liberal democratic principles.

→ See Chapter 6 for a discussion of nationalism.

→ See Chapter 7 for a discussion of multiculturalism.

There is another sense in which politics is said to be superfluous, identified and challenged by Gamble (2000). Gamble seeks to challenge what he sees as the pessimistic acceptance in the modern world that humans can no longer influence their destiny. According to this position, the forces of 'bureaucracy, technology and the global market' have led to the 'disenchantment of the world, in which the ability to change that world . . . has been lost and lost irrevocably' (14). So-called **globalization**, in particular, signals the end of national autonomy. It no longer matters what allegedly sovereign governments do because we are controlled by global economic forces that no one can alter. As a result, the 'space for politics is shrinking, and with it the possibility to imagine or to realise any serious alternative to our present condition. This it seems is our fate' (Gamble, 2000: 2–3).

→ See Chapter 2 for a discussion of identity politics.

→ See Chapters 2, 21, and 22 for a discussion of globalization.

Such pessimism is, in part at least, a cause of the alleged 'crisis of politics' seen in declining political participation and the emergence of an 'anti-politics' discourse in Western democracies. (Flinders, 2012: 10–15; Heywood, 2013: 443–5). The term 'anti-politics' is now used variously to describe a distrust of career politicians, a rejection of partisan politics as embodied in dominant party systems, a disengagement with mainstream politics or 'politics as usual', and a turn to **populism.** Anti-politics has recently been identified with the 2016 'Brexit' vote in the UK, the campaign for which was spearheaded by the previously marginal UK Independence Party (UKIP), and in the 2016 US presidential election in which Donald Trump gained support from many who saw him as not a politician.

→ See Chapters 7 and 15 for a discussion of populism.

→ See Chapter 4 for a discussion of contemporary challenges to democracy.

Should we really be so pessimistic about contemporary politics and the prospect of positive change? It would be wrong to suggest that there are no constraints, some of them severe, acting upon human will. We may have to deal with the realities of the global market and dehumanizing technologies, but it would be equally wrong to conclude that human agency has no impact. Rather, there is a tension between impersonal forces and human will, a tension 'between politics and fate', that must be recognized and tackled.

KEY POINTS

- Politics is usually predicated on the existence of competing interests and values in all societies of any complexity.
- For most commentators politics is inevitable precisely because all societies contain differences that have to be tackled in some way.
- Different versions of 'endism' proclaim the dominance of liberal democratic values, but this cannot be sustained in the face of ongoing ideological conflicts around the world.
- Contemporary politics in Western democracies appears to have generated much pessimism about the capacity of politics to actually deliver the good life, as reflected in the phenomenon of 'anti-politics'.

POLITICAL QUESTIONS

Politics, then, is essentially a mechanism for deciding, in Lasswell's words, 'Who Gets What, When, How?' If we all had the same interests and values, and there was enough of everything to go around, there would be no need to make such decisions. We could have everything we wanted. Politics is predicated on the assumption that this is not the case. As a result, students of politics ask a number of questions about the decisions that are taken.

In the first place, they will ask what values do and what should the decisions made serve? Do they serve, for instance, the values of justice or liberty, and if so, what do we mean by justice and liberty? Is a just decision one that is made in the interests of the few, the many, or all? Second, students of politics will ask who makes and should make the decisions? Is it one person who makes the decisions, or a few, many, or all? Is there anything special, it will be asked further, about democratic forms of government? Are we more obliged to obey decisions taken in a democratic way than in other ways? These types of question formed the basis of Aristotle's famous six-fold classification of political systems (**see Box 1.1 and Table 1.1**).

The third main question that students of politics will ask is why are those taking decisions able to enforce them? Here, it is important to make a distinction between power and authority, concepts which are central to politics. We could say that rulers are able to enforce their decisions either because they have the power to do so or because they have the authority to do so. The former implies some form of coercion or sanction; that those with power are able to cause those without power to behave in a way they would not otherwise have done. Clearly, a regime that relies exclusively on the exercise of power, in the sense described above, is likely to be inefficient and unstable. Such a regime will only survive if it is able to impose coercion continually, a time-consuming and difficult exercise.