

## MEANING, NATURE & DEFINITION OF POLITICAL SCIENCE

### I. Meaning

Man is a social animal. He cannot live in isolation, because he is not self-sufficient and the natural instinct to survive compels him to live a collective life. According to Aristotle, this collective life necessitates a political mechanism of rules, regulations and leadership. An organized society needs some system to make and enforce rules for orderly behaviour in society. This led to the evolution of a political system with elaborate governmental institutions & procedures in each society. Therefore, man is also a political animal. Political science is one of the oldest subjects of study of this political life of man.

### I. Nature

Politics is not only a mere institution of governance but also a mechanism for achieving societal goals. Political science is a social science concerned with the theory and practice of politics and the description and analysis of political systems and political behaviour. It includes matters concerning the allocation and transfer of power in decision making, the roles and systems of governance including governments and international organizations, political behavior and public policies.

Political science is thus a study of the state in the past, present and future;  
of political organization, political processes and political functions;  
of political institutions and political theories.

Political science has several subfields, including: political theory, public policy, national politics, international relations, human rights, environment politics and comparative politics.

**Origin :-** The term 'politics', is derived from the Greek word 'Polis', which means the city state. According to Greek Philosophers, Politics was a subject which dealt with all the activities and affairs of the city state. Their City States were known as 'Polis'. City state was an all inclusive term, as the ancient Greeks made no distinction between the state and the Government on one hand, and State and Society on the other. They never differentiated between personal life and social life. Hence according to them Politics was a total study of man, society, state, morality and so on.

- a. The antecedents of Western politics can trace their roots back to Greek thinkers Socrates, Plato (427-347 BC) and Aristotle (384-322 BC). The studies were philosophy oriented. Plato wrote The Republic and Aristotle wrote the Politics. Aristotle is known as the Father of Political Science. He is famous for his statement "Man is a political animal". The word 'politics' is derived from the Greek word 'polis', which means a city-state.
- b. During the height of the Roman Empire, famous historians documented the rise of the Roman Republic, and the organization and histories of other nations, while statesmen like Julius Caesar, Cicero and others provided us with examples of the politics of the republic and Rome's empire and wars. The study of politics during this age was oriented toward understanding history, understanding methods of governing, and describing the operation of governments.

During the Middle Ages, the study of politics was widespread in the churches and courts. Saint Thomas Aquinas was an important political thinker of this period.

c. During the Italian Renaissance, Niccolò Machiavelli established the emphasis of modern political science on direct empirical observation of political institutions and actors. His famous book, 'The Prince' is a guide to modern realist politics. Other famous men of this period were Thomas Hobbes, John Locke & Rousseau (Social contract theory). Important figures in American politics of this period were Alexander Hamilton, Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson.

d. In ancient India, the antecedents of politics can be traced back to the Rig-Veda, Samhitas, Brahmanas, the Mahabharata and Buddhist Pali Canon. Chanakya (c. 350-275 BC) was a political thinker in Takshashila. He wrote the Arthashastra, a treatise on political thought, economics and social order, which can be considered a precursor to Machiavelli's The Prince. It discusses monetary and fiscal policies, welfare, international relations, and war strategies in detail, among other topics. Manusmriti, dated to about two centuries after the time of Chanakya is another important political treatise of ancient India.

#### Stages of Evolution

- (1) philosophical: concerned with ends and purposes
- (2) institutional: concerned with political organization
- (3) behavioural: concerned with motivations and mechanism of human behavior
- (4) pluralistic: concerned with the interaction among groups and organizations
- (5) structural: concerned with the connection between the individual and the community
- (6) developmental: concerned with the process of growth, industrialization and change and the impact on government forms and policies.

#### Politics as the study of the state:-

Traditionally Political science is a science of state. Political thinkers like R.G. Gettel, J.W. Garner, Bluntschli and many others were of the view that political science was the study of the state.

R.G. Gettel defined "Political Science as a study of state in the past, present and future and of Political institutions and Political theories". J.W. Garner States, "Political Science begins and ends with the state"

**Politics as the study of the Government :-** Some Political Scientists like Paul Janet, George Catlin, Hans Eulan have accepted the view which states that politics deals with the state and government. Paul Janet writes "Political Science is concerned with the foundations of the state and principles of government. George Catlin states "Politics means either the activities of political life or the study of these activities. And these activities are generally treated as activities of the various organs of government." Prof Hans Eulan considers in his definition of politics that the study of formal government is a fundamental concern of politics. The

Oxford English Dictionary defines Political Science as "the study of the state and systems of government."

Politics as the study of national Institution :- Bridal expressed the view that "Political Science is, above all, descriptive study which brings together the description of national political institutions, their history, their ideological principles, their working, the forces that direct them, the influence they undergo, the results they obtain and their effect on the life of the country and its relations with neighboring states".

Traditional Approach :- The concept of Political Science as a study of State, Government and national Institution is not considered adequate today. This aspect of above definitions emphasizes the legal structure only. They do not pay attention to what is happening within the State. Political Science must include the study of informal structures, facts and reality of Politics. Hence ,modern Political thinkers defined Political Science differently and taken modern approach.

Political Science as a Study of Power :- Modern Political thinkers like Lasswell, Robert Dahl have defined politics in terms of power, influence, and authority. According to these thinkers Power has acquired prominent position in political thought. Harold Lasswell considers, "Politics is the study of shaping and sharing Political powers" Robert A. Dahl defined that, "A Political system is any persistent pattern of human relationship that involves, to a significant extent power, rule or authority."

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## II. Importance of the study of political science (Scope)

The study of politics is both humanistic and scientific, and is centuries old. Aristotle called it the "queen of the sciences". Today's political research involves highly scientific and rigorous attempts to understand human behavior and world events. Political scientists provide the frameworks from which journalists, special interest groups, politicians, and the electorate analyze issues.

Political science as a discipline deals with various aspects like:

- a. *Study of state and government*- it deals with the nature and formation of the State and tries to understand various forms and functions of the government.
- b. *Study of associations and institutions*- in organized way the fundamental problems of political science include, first, an investigation of the origin and the nature of the state, second an inquiry into the nature, history and forms of political institutions and third, deduction, therefore, so far as possible, of laws of political growth and development.
- c. *Study of national and international problems*- modern demands of defense of territory, representative government and national unity have made political science not only the science of political independence but that of state sovereignty also.

- d. *Study of political behavior of man*- it may be said that the character of political science in all its parts is determined by its basic pre-supposition regarding man.
- e. *Study of the past, present and future of development*- political science attempts to explain the meaning and the essential nature of the state and deals with the laws of its progress and development within itself and in relation to international organizations and other states.
- f. *Study of the concepts of power, authority & influence*- with the behavioural revolution the central topic for study has become the study of power. Consequently the scope has widened to include new aspects like political socialization, political culture, political development and informal structures like interest and pressure groups.

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### III. Definitions

1. From the traditional point of view we may define political science as "the study of the state and government in all their manifestations, aspects and relationships". In this sense, politics can be domestic, national, federal, municipal or international.

These early definitions of political science dealt generally with state and government.

- a. J.W. Garner: "Political Science begins and ends with the state"; "Politics is the study of State & Government".
- b. R.G. Gettel: "Political Science is the historical investigation of what the state has been, an analytical study of what the state is and a political, ethical discussion of what the state ought to be".
- c. Leacock: "Political science deals with government only".
- d. Paul Janet: "Political science is that part of the social science which treats the foundations of the state and the principles of government".

2. In the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century there developed a new way of looking at political science. This new approach is known as behavioural approach. The main thrust of the new view is the treatment of politics as an activity and a process.

In this context, new definitions emerged.

- e. Harold Laswell: "Politics is the study of influence and the influential" or "the study of the shaping and sharing of power"
- f. David Easton: "Politics is the authoritative allocation of values."
- g. Catlin: "Political Science is the study of the act of human and social control".
- h. Andrew Heywood: "Politics can be defined as an activity through which people make, preserve and amend the general rules under which they live."

Modern political scientists consider politics as a process centering around power and influence. They are concerned with not just the state and the government, but also the study and evaluation of political activities, political power, processes and non-governmental institutions.

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#### IV. Perspectives on politics

*Politics as a human (social) activity:* Simple things like our opinions, perceptions of rights & wrongs, competing needs, conflicting interests ultimately leads to a system of rules for conflict resolution and cooperation. The inescapable presence of diversity and scarcity ensures that politics is an inevitable feature of human condition. Adrian Leftwich (*What is Politics?*) finds politics is the heart of all collective social activity, formal and informal, public and private, in all human groups, institutions and societies.

*Andrew Heywood (Politics 2007) sees Politics as follows:*

(1) *Politics as art of government:* Here politics is the classic activity of making and enforcement of collective decisions. The state as the central concept of politics has a long history. The state has several specialized structures, institutions, officer and roles. It has the monopoly of coercive power. In these circumstances, it was natural to understand politics as the study of the state. Until the Second World War, the state served as the chief organizing idea of politics.

(2) *Politics as public affairs:* The meaning of politics can be stretched beyond the narrow realm of government to a broader conception of 'public life' or 'public affairs', because of its 'public' character. Aristotle said 'man is a political animal'. Rousseau and JS mill supported this outlook.

(3) *Politics as compromise & consensus (study of interaction among interest groups):* According to this, politics has a wider scope. Politics is seen as an act of conflict and cooperation among individuals and various groups in the society to secure values like liberty, equality, justice, welfare etc., and to organize and use a public power for this purpose (Bernard Crick). Politics is thus an interaction between man & society resolving conflicts through conciliation and negotiation instead of violence. Both the liberal and Marxist views of politics study it as a part of this social process. As a result of this, non-formal institutions like pressure groups, public opinion, interest groups, political parties etc. became the subjects of politics.

Thus, within its fold, there are discussions on theories of state origin, functions, sovereignty, liberty, rights forms and organs of government, representation, political parties, pressure groups, public opinion, ideologies, and international relations and institutions.

(4) *Politics as the study of power:* After rejecting politics as the study of state as insufficient, modern thinkers tried to find the axis of politics and they found it in the concept of power. The new understanding of politics was that it is a struggle to share or influence the distribution of power, whether between states or among the groups within the state. There are two advantages

to study politics from the point of view of power- firstly, it focuses attention on process rather than on legal abstractions of the state. Secondly, this approach pays greater attention to man as the basic unit of analysis. Politics became directly concerned with the needs, interests and goals of men that give rise to power-relationship among them and ultimately lead to a public policy.

In short there are three forms of power: political, economic and ideological. Political power is concerned with the maintenance of law and order and dispensing justice through reward and punishment.

#### **Politics as the study of power (in detail)**

Though identifiable with terms like influence, coercion, force, domination, authority, control and the like, the term 'power' has its own meaning. Power is a relation. While power is coercive, influence is persuasive authority is the legitimate aspect of power and force is manifested power.

Power is "the ability to determine the behaviour of others in accord with one's own wishes". The power theory of politics is as old as the Greeks, though it has assumed much importance in recent times. Power consists fundamentally of relationships, of subordination, of dominance and submission, of the governors and the governed and the study of politics involves the study of these relationships.

In other words, the study of politics is concerned with the description and analysis of the manner in which power is obtained, exercised and controlled, and the purpose for which it is used, the manner in which decisions are made, the factors which influence the making of these decisions and the context in which these decisions are made.

Power can be exhibited in three dimensions: political, economic and ideological.

**Political power:** it belongs to the state and is manifested through the organs of the government like legislature, executive, military, judiciary, police, bureaucracy etc. Power is shared by political parties, pressure groups, elites, factions, leaders etc. Power exists in all political processes, however democratic they may be.

Liberals say that power is dispersed in society and that it changes hands often. Marxists hold a different viewpoint. According to them power is concentrated in a class and only revolution can make it to change hands.

Economic power: finds its place in the form of ownership and control of national wealth, as well as means of production and distribution. Economic power and political power are mutually complementary.

Liberals say that it is diffused and hard work determines the degree of economic power one can gain. Marxists again hold the view that economic power is also concentrated in the hands of a few and they manipulate it to gain political power.

Ideological power: resides in the prevailing ideas acceptable to the people. Ideology literally means a set of ideas in which people have unquestionable faith and they also strive to put them into action. The dominant class will also try to propagate and implement ideas that are congenial to their interests, whether economic or political. They may use all available media, elites, intellectuals, religious institutions, educational systems, associations and institutions to achieve this while oppressing counter ideologies.

Authority: Power with legitimacy. Max Weber classifies it into three: traditional, charismatic & legal-rational or bureaucratic.

# What is Politics?

'Man is by nature a political animal.'

*ARISTOTLE Politics, I*

Politics is exciting because people disagree. They disagree about how they should live. Who should get what? How should power and other resources be distributed? Should society be based on cooperation or conflict? And so on. They also disagree about how such matters should be resolved. How should collective decisions be made? Who should have a say? How much influence should each person have? And so forth. For Aristotle, this made politics the 'master science': that is, nothing less than the activity through which human beings attempt to improve their lives and create the Good Society. Politics is, above all, a social activity. It is always a dialogue, and never a monologue. Solitary individuals such as Robinson Crusoe may be able to develop a simple economy, produce art, and so on, but they cannot engage in politics. Politics emerges only with the arrival of a Man (or Woman) Friday. Nevertheless, the disagreement that lies at the heart of politics also extends to the nature of the subject and how it should be studied. People disagree about both what it is that makes social interaction 'political', and how political activity can best be analysed and explained.

The central issues examined in this chapter are as follows:

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### Defining politics

Politics, in its broadest sense, is the activity through which people make, preserve and amend the general rules under which they live. Although politics is also an academic subject (sometimes indicated by the use of 'Politics' with a capital P), it is then clearly the study of this activity. Politics is thus inextricably linked to the phenomena of conflict and cooperation. On the one hand, the existence of rival opinions, different wants, competing needs and opposing interests guarantees disagreement about the rules under which people live. On the other hand, people recognize that, in order to influence these rules or ensure that they are upheld, they must work with others - hence Hannah Arendt's (see p. 9) definition of political power as 'acting in concert'. This is why the heart of politics is often portrayed as a process of conflict resolution, in which rival views or competing interests are reconciled with one another. However, politics in this broad sense is better thought of as a search for conflict resolution than as its achievement, as not all conflicts are, or can be, resolved. Nevertheless, the inescapable presence of diversity (we are not all alike) and scarcity (there is never enough to go around) ensures that politics is an inevitable feature of the human condition.

Any attempt to clarify the meaning of 'politics' must nevertheless address two major problems. The first is the mass of associations that the word has when used in everyday language; in other words, politics is a 'loaded' term. Whereas most people think of, say, economics, geography, history and biology simply as academic subjects, few people come to politics without preconceptions. Many, for instance, automatically assume that students and teachers of politics must in some way be biased, finding it difficult to believe that the subject can be approached in an impartial and dispassionate manner. To make matters worse, politics is usually thought of as a 'dirty' word: it conjures up images of trouble, disruption and even violence on the one hand, and deceit, manipulation and lies on the other. There is nothing new about such associations. As long ago as 1775, Samuel Johnson dismissed politics as 'nothing more than a means of rising in the world', while in the nineteenth century the US historian Henry Adams summed up politics as 'the systematic organization of hatreds'. Any attempt to define politics therefore entails trying to disentangle the term from such associations. Not uncommonly, this has meant attempting to rescue the term from its unsavoury reputation by establishing that politics is a valuable, even laudable, activity.

The second and more intractable difficulty is that even respected authorities cannot agree what the subject is about. Politics is defined in such different ways: as the exercise of power, the exercise of authority, the making of collective decisions, the allocation of scarce resources, the practice of deception and manipulation, and so on. The virtue of the definition advanced in this text, 'the making, preserving and amending of general social rules', is that it is sufficiently broad to encompass most, if not all, of the competing definitions. However, problems arise when the definition is unpacked, or when the meaning is refined. For instance, does 'politics' refer to a particular way in which rules are made, preserved or amended (that is, peacefully, by interests,

Cooperation: Working

and institutions, or only in certain ones (that is, government and public life)? together; achieving goals through collective action.

From this perspective, politics may be treated as an 'essentially contested' concept (see p. 19), in the sense that the term has a number of acceptable or legitimate mean-

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ings. On the other hand, these different views may simply consist of contrasting conceptions of the same, if necessarily vague, concept. Whether we are dealing with rival concepts or alternative conceptions, the debate about 'what is politics?' is worth pursuing because it exposes some of the deepest intellectual and ideological disagreements in the academic study of the subject. The different views of politics examined here are as follows:

- politics as the art of government
- politics as public affairs
- politics as compromise and consensus
- politics as power and the distribution of resources.

### Politics as the art of government

'Politics is not a science ... but an art', Chancellor Bismarck is reputed to have told the German Reichstag. The art Bismarck had in mind was the art of government, the exercise of control within society through the making and enforcement of collective decisions. This is perhaps the classical definition of politics, developed from the original meaning of the term in Ancient Greece.

The word 'politics' is derived from *polis*, meaning literally city-state. Ancient Greek society was divided into a collection of independent city-states, each of which possessed its own system of government. The largest and most influential of these city-states was Athens, often portrayed as the cradle of democratic government. In this light, politics can be understood to refer to the affairs of the *polis* - in effect, 'what concerns the *polis*'. The modern form of this definition is therefore 'what concerns the state' (see p. 87). This view of politics is clearly evident in the everyday use of the term: people are said to be 'in politics' when they hold public office, or to be 'entering politics' when they seek to do so. It is also a definition that academic political science has helped to perpetuate.

In many ways, the notion that politics amounts to 'what concerns the state' is the traditional view of the discipline, reflected in the tendency for academic study to focus upon the personnel and machinery of government. To study politics is in essence to study government, or, more broadly, to study the exercise of authority. This view is advanced in the writings of the influential US political scientist David Easton (1979, 1981), who defined politics as the 'authoritative allocation of values'. By this he meant that politics encompasses the various processes through which government responds to pressures from the larger society, in particular by allocating benefits, rewards or penalties. 'Authoritative values' are therefore ones that are widely accepted in society, and are considered binding by the mass of citizens. In this view, politics is associated with 'policy' (see p. 400): that is, with formal or authoritative decisions that establish a plan of action for the community.

However, what is striking about this definition is that it offers a highly restricted view of politics. Politics is what takes place within a polity, a system of social organization centred upon the machinery of government. Politics is therefore practised in cabinet rooms, legislative chambers, government departments and the like, and it is engaged in by a limited and specific group of people, notably politicians, civil servants and lobbyists. This means that most people, most institutions and most social activities can be regarded as being 'outside' politics. Businesses, schools and other educational institutions, community groups, families and so on are in this sense 'nonpolitical'.

**Polis:** (Greek) City-state; classically understood to imply the highest or most desirable form of social organization.  
**Polity:** A society organized through the exercise of political authority; for Aristotle, rule by the many in the interests of all.

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because they are not engaged in 'running the country'. By the same token, to portray politics as an essentially state-bound activity is to ignore the increasingly important international or global influences upon modern life, such as the impact of trans-national technology and multinational corporations. In this sense, this definition of politics is a hangover from the days when the nation-state (see p. 121) could still be regarded as an independent actor in world affairs. Moreover, there is a growing recognition that the task of managing complex societies is no longer simply carried out by government but involves a wide range of public and private sector bodies. This is reflected in the idea that government is being replaced by 'governance'.

This definition can, however, be narrowed still further. This is evident in the tendency to treat politics as the equivalent of party politics. In other words, the realm of 'the political' is restricted to those state actors who are consciously motivated by ideological beliefs, and who seek to advance them through membership of a formal organization such as a political party. This is the sense in which politicians are described as 'political', whereas civil servants are seen as 'nonpolitical', as long as, of course, they act in a neutral and professional fashion. Similarly, judges are taken to be 'nonpolitical' figures while they interpret the law impartially and in accordance with the available evidence, but they may be accused of being 'political' if their judgement is influenced by personal preferences or some other form of bias.

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The link between politics and the affairs of the state also helps to explain why negative or pejorative images have so often been attached to politics. This is because, in the popular mind, politics is closely associated with the activities of politicians. Put brutally, politicians are often seen as power-seeking hypocrites who conceal personal ambition behind the rhetoric of public service and ideological conviction. Indeed, this perception has become more common in the modern period as intensified media exposure has more effectively brought to light examples of corruption and dishonesty, giving rise to the phenomenon of anti-politics. This rejection of the personnel and machinery of conventional political life is rooted in a view of politics as a self-serving, two-faced and unprincipled activity, clearly evident in the use of derogatory phrases such as 'office politics' and 'politicking'. Such an image of politics is sometimes traced back to the writings of Niccolo Machiavelli, who, in *The Prince* ([1531] 1961), developed a strictly realistic account of politics that drew attention to the use by political leaders of cunning, cruelty and manipulation.

Such a negative view of politics reflects the essentially liberal perception that, as individuals are self-interested, political power is corrupting, because it encourages those 'in power' to exploit their position for personal advantage and at the expense of others. This is famously expressed in Lord Acton's (1834-1902) aphorism: 'power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely'. Nevertheless, few who view politics in this way doubt that political activity is an inevitable and permanent feature of social existence. However venal politicians may be, there is a general, if grudging, acceptance that they are always with us. Without some kind of mechanism for allocating authoritative values, society would simply disintegrate into a civil war of each against all, as the early social-contract theorists argued (see p. 89). The task is therefore not to abolish politicians and bring politics to an end, but rather to ensure that politics is conducted within a framework of checks and constraints that ensure that governmental power is not abused.

### Politics as public affairs

A second and broader conception of politics moves it beyond the narrow realm of government to what is thought of as 'public life' or 'public affairs'. In other words, the distinction between 'the political' and 'the nonpolitical' coincides with the division between an essentially public sphere of life and what can be thought of as a private sphere. Such a view of politics is often traced back to the work of the famous Greek

Anti-politics: Disillusionment with formal and established political processes, reflected in nonparticipation, support for antisystem parties, or the use of direct action.

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philosopher Aristotle. In *Politics*, Aristotle declared that 'man is by nature a political animal', by which he meant that it is only within a political community that human beings can live 'the good life'. From this viewpoint, then, politics is an ethical activity concerned with creating a 'just society'; it is what Aristotle called the 'master science'. However, where should the line between 'public' life and 'private' life be drawn? The traditional distinction between the public realm and the private realm conforms to the division between the state and civil society. The institutions of the state (the apparatus of government, the courts, the police, the army, the social-security system and so forth) can be regarded as 'public' in the sense that they are responsible for the collective organization of community life. Moreover, they are funded at the public's expense, out of taxation. In contrast, civil society consists of what Edmund Burke (see p. 47) called the 'little platoons', institutions such as the family and kinship groups, private businesses, trade unions, clubs, community groups and so on that are 'private' in the sense that they are set up and funded by individual citizens to satisfy their own interests, rather than those of the larger society. On the basis of this 'public/private' division, politics is restricted to the activities of the state itself and the responsibilities that are properly exercised by public bodies. Those areas of life that individuals can and do manage for themselves (the economic, social, domestic, personal, cultural and artistic spheres, and so on) are therefore clearly 'nonpolitical'. An alternative 'public/private' divide is sometimes defined in terms of a further and more subtle distinction, namely that between 'the political' and 'the personal' (see Figure 1.1). Although civil society can be distinguished from the state, it nevertheless contains a range of institutions that are thought of as 'public' in the wider sense that they are open institutions, operating in public, to which the public has access. One of the crucial implications of this is that it broadens our notion of the political, transferring the economy in particular from the private to the public realm. A form of politics can thus be found in the workplace. Nevertheless, although this view regards institutions such as businesses, community groups, clubs and trade unions as 'public', it remains a restricted view of politics. According to this perspective, politics does not, and should not, infringe upon 'personal' affairs and institutions. Feminist thinkers in particular have pointed out that this implies that politics effectively stops at the front door; it does not take place in the family, in domestic life, or in personal relationships. This view is illustrated, for example, by the tendency of politicians to draw a clear distinction between their professional conduct and their personal or domestic behaviour. By classifying, say, cheating on their partners or treating their children badly as 'personal' matters, they are able to deny the political significance of such behaviour on the grounds that it does not touch on their conduct of public affairs.

Fig. 1.1 Two views of the public/private divide

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The view of politics as an essentially 'public' activity has generated both positive and negative images. In a tradition dating back to Aristotle, politics has been seen as a noble and enlightened activity precisely because of its 'public' character. This position was firmly endorsed by Hannah Arendt, who argued in *The Human Condition* (1958) that politics is the most important form of human activity because it involves interaction amongst free and equal citizens. It thus gives meaning to life and affirms the uniqueness of each individual. Theorists such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau (see p. 75) and John Stuart Mill (see p. 46) who portrayed political participation as a good in itself have drawn similar conclusions. Rousseau argued that only through the direct and continuous participation of all citizens in political life can the state be bound to the common good, or what he called the 'general will' (see p. 74). In Mill's view, involvement in 'public' affairs is educational in that it promotes the personal, moral and intellectual development of the individual.

In sharp contrast, however, politics as public activity has also been portrayed as a form of unwanted interference. Liberal theorists in particular have exhibited a preference for civil society over the state, on the grounds that 'private' life is a realm of choice, personal freedom and individual responsibility. This is most clearly demonstrated by attempts to narrow the realm of 'the political', commonly expressed as the wish to 'keep politics out of private activities such as business, sport and family life. From this point of view, politics is unwholesome quite simply because it prevents people acting as they choose. For example, it may interfere with how firms conduct their business, or with how and with whom we play sports, or with how we bring up our children.

### Politics as compromise and consensus

The third conception of politics relates not so much to the arena within which politics is conducted as to the way in which decisions are made. Specifically, politics is seen as a particular means of resolving conflict: that is, by compromise, conciliation and negotiation, rather than through force and naked power. This is what is implied when politics is portrayed as 'the art of the possible'. Such a definition is inherent in the everyday use of the term. For instance, the description of a solution to a problem as a 'political' solution implies peaceful debate and arbitration, as opposed to what is often called a 'military' solution. Once again, this view of politics has been traced

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back to the writings of Aristotle and, in particular, to his belief that what he called 'polity' is the ideal system of government, as it is 'mixed' in the sense that it combines both aristocratic and democratic features (see pp. 27-8). One of the leading modern exponents of this view is Bernard Crick. In his classic study *In Defence of Politics*, Crick offered the following definition:

Politics [is] the activity by which differing interests within a given unit of rule are conciliated by giving them a share in power in proportion to their importance to the welfare and the survival of the whole community. (Crick, [1962] 2000:21)

In this view, the key to politics is therefore a wide dispersal of power. Accepting that conflict is inevitable, Crick argued that when social groups and interests possess power they must be conciliated; they cannot merely be crushed. This is why he portrayed politics as 'that solution to the problem of order which chooses conciliation rather than violence and coercion' (p. 30). Such a view of politics reflects a deep commitment to liberal-rationalist principles. It is based on resolute faith in the efficacy of debate and discussion, as well as on the belief that society is characterized by consensus rather than by irreconcilable conflict. In other words, the disagreements that exist can be resolved without resort to intimidation and violence. Critics, however, point out that Crick's conception of politics is heavily biased towards the form of politics that takes place in western pluralist democracies: in effect, he equated politics with electoral choice and party competition. As a result, his model has little to tell us about, say, one-party states or military regimes.

This view of politics has an unmistakeably positive character. Politics is certainly no Utopian solution (compromise means that concessions are made by all sides, leaving no one perfectly satisfied), but it is undoubtedly preferable to the alternatives: bloodshed and brutality. In this sense, politics can be seen as a civilized and civilizing force. People should be encouraged to respect politics as an activity, and should be prepared to engage in the political life of their own community. Nevertheless, Crick saw politics as an embattled and often neglected activity. He saw its principal enemy as 'the desire for certainty at any cost', and he warned that this is demonstrated in many forms, including the seductive influence of political ideologies, blind faith in democracy, the impact of rabid nationalism, and the promise of science to disclose objective truth.

### Politics as power

The fourth definition of politics is both the broadest and the most radical. Rather than confining politics to a particular sphere (the government, the state or the 'public' realm) this view sees politics at work in all social activities and in every corner of human existence. As Adrian Leftwich proclaimed in *What is Politics? The Activity and Its Study* (1984:64), 'politics is at the heart of all collective social activity, formal and informal, public and private, in all human groups, institutions and societies'. In this sense, politics takes place at every level of social interaction; it can be found within families and amongst small groups of friends just as much as amongst nations and on the global stage. However, what is it that is distinctive about political activity? What marks off politics from any other form of social behaviour?

At its broadest, politics concerns the production, distribution and use of resources in the course of social existence. Politics is, in essence, power: the ability to achieve a desired outcome, through whatever means. This notion was neatly