

POLITICAL AUTHORITY

Asst Prof Maitreyee Mishra

How we govern ourselves

- Ancient times:
 - Societies governed on smaller scales.
 - Tribal societies- village elders interpret tribal law
 - Later societies, such as in Medieval Europe or Han dynasty- supreme authority with King. Day to day governance- local lords.
 - Yet the impact on people's lives limited. No regulation, only in religion.

How we govern ourselves

- Modern state as we know it is a recent phenomenon
- Modern- governed by states with unparalleled power.
 - Protection against attacks on ourselves and possessions
 - Lay down terms through which we make our living, communicate with others, raise children, travel, etc.
 - Healthcare and education benefits. Roads, houses, parks, museums, sports grounds.
- We are hence- creatures of the states.
- Nonetheless, not all states provide these equally.
- Yet we agree that no one can benefit from failed states.

Political authority and us

- So a political authority claims right to govern our lives.
- What justifies this claim?
- In what circumstances is legitimate political authority wielded?
- As citizens how far are we obliged to obey laws made by them and follow them?
- State exercises political authority:
 - It is recognised as authority- people obey the law thinking that the body that made laws has the right to do so.
 - Those who refuse to obey are seen as law breakers- to be caught/punished.

Political authority and us

- Unless most people obeyed laws most of the time (thinking that it is legitimate), the system cannot function.
- Political authority is a combination of authority with forced compliance.
- Why do we comply then, given that it may lead to “unwelcome requirements”- taxes (making us poorer) or make us do things we are morally opposed to (wars).
- Thomas Hobbes- without political authority we live in fear, in vicious competition. Authority for Hobbes- undivided and unrestricted.
- We obey authority: Hobbes- we accept the state as opposed to state of nature.
- For Locke- we accept benefits. Acceptance is consent.

Anarchist readings

- For the anarchist, the state is for the benefit of those with power.
- Two alternatives provided to political authority:
 - Community
 - Market
- Community:
 - In community everyone knows each other. Easier to maintain order.
 - Trust, Self-policing
 - No central authority/coercive force
- Yet- how will the community decide how resources are shared.

Anarchist readings

- Market:
 - Market anarchists are called libertarians.
 - Market replaces state
 - Contract pay for services provided by state.
 - Firms offer to protect clients and property

Yet, profit may become key as opposed to justice.

What about public goods- can these be provided in economic markets.

Political authority

- Hence political authority required to ensure public goods are provided.
- The questions hence to be asked are: what kind of authority, how much authority.
- Political obligation- complying with laws, political authority.
- Compliance benefits all- taxes paid, schools, roads, hospitals.
- Yet questions- are benefits for all?
- Are costs and benefits distributed equally?
- What if someone is justified in breaking law:
 - Hobbes- authority crumbles without obedience. (?)
 - Civil disobedience- protest to put pressure on govt to change policies.

DEMOCRACY

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To democracy

- Thomas Hobbes preferred monarch to avoid internal divisions.
- However trusting everything to one person is risky.
- On the other hand, authority could be given to those who are wise and virtuous- argument for aristocracy. Followed till mid 19th century.
- However, what does goodness in a ruler mean?
- How to select them?
- Aristocracy in practice- rule of well-born, educated, etc.

Democracy

- Hence, constituting political authority democratically became more popular.
- Two assumptions- no person was naturally superior to another. Secondly- interests of people safeguarded by making them the final source of political authority.
- Hence what role should people play in govt?
- Should there be direct involvement in legislating as Rousseau argued? If so, how?
- Or should they be involved through representatives- who wield power on their behalf?

Democracy

- In practice, democracies mean limited govt role for citizens- vote, referendum, form groups to lobby representatives. That's the extent of authority.
- Real power, however, to determine the future of democratic societies lie in small groups- govt ministers, civil servants, parliament, legislative assembly.
- If democracy is the best way of making political decisions, why aren't people directly involved:
 - -impractical for millions to make large no. of decisions.
 - Another angle is a widespread belief that people are not competent to understand political issues- hand them those who can.
 - Joseph Schumpeter's *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*- citizen's job to choose team of leaders, not to directly decide issues.

Democracy

- Elective aristocracy: citizens recognise competent people to make decisions on their behalf.
- Political authority requires political judgement.
- Will the elective aristocracy make the best decision?
- Everyone contributes to decisions- irrespective of class, ethnic/indigenous groups, etc.
- Minority vs majority.
- Moral element