CHAPTER 1

What is Politics?

'Man is by nature a political animal.'

ARISTOTLE, *Politics*, 1

PREVIEW

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 what it is that makes social interaction 'political', whether it is where it takes place (within government, the state or the public sphere generally), or the kind of activity it involves (peacefully resolving conflict or exercising control over less powerful groups). Disagreement about the nature of politics as an academic discipline means that it embraces a range of theoretical approaches and a variety of schools of analysis. Finally, globalizing tendencies have encouraged some to speculate that the disciplinary divide between politics and international relations has now become redundant.

KEY ISSUES

- What are the defining features of politics as an activity?
- How has 'politics' been understood by various thinkers and traditions?
- What are the main approaches to the study of politics as an academic discipline?
- Can the study of politics be scientific?
- What roles do concepts, models and theories play in political analysis?
- How have globalizing trends affected the relationship between politics and international relations?

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. 7) 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 (see p. 19). 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'.

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 science of government, 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 debate), or to all such processes? Similarly, is politics practised in all social contexts and institutions, or only in certain ones (that is, government and public life)?

From this perspective, politics may be treated as an 'essentially contested' concept, in the sense that the term has a number of acceptable or legitimate meanings (concepts are discussed more fully later in the chapter). On the other

● **Conflict**: Competition between opposing forces, reflecting a diversity of opinions, preferences, needs or interests.

● **Cooperation**: Working together; achieving goals through collective action.

	Politics as an arena	Politics as a process
Definitions of politics	The art of government Public affairs	Compromise and consensus Power and the distribution of resources
Approaches to the study of politics	Behaviouralism Rational-choice theory Institutionalism	Feminism Marxism Post-positivist approaches

Figure 1.1 Approaches to defining politics

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, it is helpful to distinguish between two broad approaches to defining politics (Hay, 2002; Leftwich, 2004). In the first, politics is associated with an *arena* or location, in which case behaviour becomes 'political' because of where it takes place. In the second, politics is viewed as a *process* or mechanism, in which case 'political' behaviour is behaviour that exhibits distinctive characteristics or qualities, and so can take place in any, and perhaps all, social contexts. Each of these broad approaches has spawned alternative definitions of politics, and, as discussed later in the chapter, helped to shape different schools of political analysis (see Figure 1.1). Indeed, the debate about 'what is politics?' is worth pursuing precisely because it exposes some of the deepest intellectual and ideological disagreement in the academic study of the subject.

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. 57). 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

● ***Polis***: (Greek) City-state; classically understood to imply the highest or most desirable form of social organization.

CONCEPT

Authority

Authority can most simply be defined as 'legitimate power'. Whereas power is the *ability* to influence the behaviour of others, authority is the *right* to do so. Authority is therefore based on an acknowledged duty to obey rather than on any form of coercion or manipulation. In this sense, authority is power cloaked in legitimacy or rightfulness. Weber (see p. 82) distinguished between three kinds of authority, based on the different grounds on which obedience can be established: *traditional* authority is rooted in history; *charismatic* authority stems from personality; and *legal–rational* authority is grounded in a set of impersonal rules.

study to focus on 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 those 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. 352): 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 on 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 'non-political', 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 on modern life, as discussed in the next main section.

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 'non-political', as long as, of course, they act in a neutral and professional fashion. Similarly, judges are taken to be 'non-political' 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.

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** (as discussed in Chapter 20). 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 Niccolò Machiavelli, who, in *The Prince* ([1532] 1961), developed a strictly realistic account of politics that drew attention to the use by political leaders of cunning, cruelty and manipulation.

● **Polity**: A society organized through the exercise of political authority; for Aristotle, rule by the many in the interests of all.

● **Anti-politics**: Disillusionment with formal or established political processes, reflected in non-participation, support for anti-system parties, or the use of direct action.

Niccolò Machiavelli (1469–1527)

Italian politician and author. The son of a civil lawyer, Machiavelli's knowledge of public life was gained from a sometimes precarious existence in politically unstable Florence. He served as Second Chancellor (1498–1512), and was despatched on missions to France, Germany and throughout Italy. After a brief period of imprisonment and the restoration of Medici rule, Machiavelli embarked on a literary career. His major work, *The Prince*, published in 1532, drew heavily on his first-hand observations of the statecraft of Cesare Borgia and the power politics that dominated his period. It was written as a guide for the future prince of a united Italy. The adjective 'Machiavellian' subsequently came to mean 'cunning and duplicitous'.

CONCEPT

Power

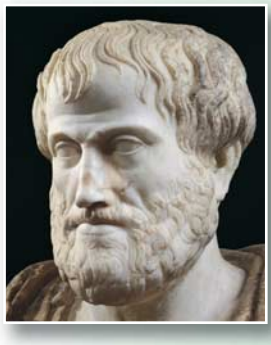
Power, in its broadest sense, is the ability to achieve a desired outcome, sometimes seen as the 'power *to*' do something. This includes everything from the ability to keep oneself alive to the ability of government to promote economic growth. In politics, however, power is usually thought of as a relationship; that is, as the ability to influence the behaviour of others in a manner not of their choosing. This implies having 'power *over*' people. More narrowly, power may be associated with the ability to punish or reward, bringing it close to force or manipulation, in contrast to 'influence'. (See 'faces' of power, p. 9 and dimensions of global power, p. 428.)

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. 62). 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 guarantee 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 non-political' 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 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,



Aristotle (384–322 BCE)

Greek philosopher. Aristotle was a student of Plato (see p. 13) and tutor of the young Alexander the Great. He established his own school of philosophy in Athens in 335 BCE; this was called the 'peripatetic school' after his tendency to walk up and down as he talked. His 22 surviving treatises, compiled as lecture notes, range over logic, physics, metaphysics, astronomy, meteorology, biology, ethics and politics. In the Middle Ages, Aristotle's work became the foundation of Islamic philosophy, and it was later incorporated into Christian theology. His best-known political work is *Politics*, in which he portrayed the city-state as the basis for virtue and well-being, and argued that democracy is preferable to oligarchy (see p. 267–9).

CONCEPT

Civil society

Civil society originally meant a 'political community'. The term is now more commonly distinguished from the state, and is used to describe institutions that are 'private', in that they are independent from government and organized by individuals in pursuit of their own ends. Civil society therefore refers to a realm of autonomous groups and associations: businesses, interest groups, clubs, families and so on. The term 'global civil society' (see p. 106) has become fashionable as a means of referring to nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) (see p. 248) and transnational social movements (see p. 260).

civil society consists of what Edmund Burke (see p. 36) 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 'non-political'.

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 1.2). 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 on '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 (see p. 11). 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.

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*

Hannah Arendt (1906–75)

German political theorist and philosopher. Hannah Arendt was brought up in a middle-class Jewish family. She fled Germany in 1933 to escape from Nazism, and finally settled in the USA, where her major work was produced. Her wide-ranging, even idiosyncratic, writing was influenced by the existentialism of Heidegger (1889–1976) and Jaspers (1883–1969); she described it as 'thinking without barriers'. Her major works include *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), which drew parallels between Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia, her major philosophical work *The Human Condition* (1958), *On Revolution* (1963) and *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1963). The final work stimulated particular controversy because it stressed the 'banality of evil', by portraying Eichmann as a Nazi functionary rather than as a raving ideologue.

Public	**Private**
The state: apparatus of government	Civil society: autonomous bodies – businesses, trade unions, clubs, families, and so on

Public	**Private**
Public realm: politics, commerce, work, art, culture and so on	Personal realm: family and domestic life

Figure 1.2 Two views of the public/private divide

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. 97) and John Stuart Mill (see p. 198) 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'. 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

CONCEPT

Consensus

Consensus means agreement, but it refers to an agreement of a particular kind. It implies, first, a broad agreement, the terms of which are accepted by a wide range of individuals or groups. Second, it implies an agreement about fundamental or underlying principles, as opposed to a precise or exact agreement. In other words, a consensus permits disagreement on matters of emphasis or detail. A *procedural* consensus is a willingness to make decisions through a process of consultation and bargaining. A *substantive* consensus is an overlap of ideological positions that reflect agreement about broad policy goals.

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 to the arena within which politics is conducted but 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 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. 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)

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'. 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, a failure to understand that politics as a process of compromise and reconciliation is neccessarily frustrating and difficult (because in involves listening carefully to the opinions of others) may have contributed to a growing popular disenchantment with democratic politics across much of the

developed world. As Stoker (2006) put it, 'Politics is designed to disappoint'; its outcomes are 'often messy, ambiguous and never final'. This is an issue to which we will return in the final chapter of the book.

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* (2004), '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?

Focus on . . .

'Faces' of power

Power can be said to be exercised whenever A gets B to do something that B would not otherwise have done. However, A can influence B in various ways. This allows us to distinguish between different dimensions or 'faces' of power:

- **Power as decision-making**: This face of power consists of conscious actions that in some way influence the content of decisions. The classic account of this form of power is found in Robert Dahl's *Who Governs? Democracy and Power in an American City* (1961), which made judgements about who had power by analysing decisions in the light of the known preferences of the actors involved. Such decisions can nevertheless be influenced in a variety of ways. In *Three Faces of Power* (1989), Keith Boulding distinguished between the use of force or intimidation (the stick), productive exchanges involving mutual gain (the deal), and the creation of obligations, loyalty and commitment (the kiss).
- **Power as agenda setting**: The second face of power, as suggested by Bachrach and Baratz (1962), is the ability to prevent decisions being made: that is, in effect, 'non-decision-making'. This involves the ability to set or control the political agenda, thereby preventing issues or proposals from being aired in the first place. For instance, private businesses may exert power both by campaigning to defeat proposed consumer-protection legislation (first face), and by lobbying parties and politicians to prevent the question of consumer rights being publicly discussed (second face).
- **Power as thought control**: The third face of power is the ability to influence another by shaping what he or she thinks, wants, or needs. This is power expressed as ideological indoctrination or psychological control. This is what Lukes (2004) called the 'radical' view of power, and it overlaps with the notion of 'soft' power (see p. 428). An example of this would be the ability of advertising to shape consumer tastes, often by cultivating associations with a 'brand'. In political life, the exercise of this form of power is seen in the use of propaganda and, more generally, in the impact of ideology (see p. 28).

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 summed up in the title of Harold Lasswell's book *Politics: Who Gets What, When, How?* (1936). From this perspective, politics is about diversity and conflict, but the essential ingredient is the existence of scarcity: the simple fact that, while human needs and desires are infinite, the resources available to satisfy them are always limited. Politics can therefore be seen as a struggle over scarce resources, and power can be seen as the means through which this struggle is conducted.

Advocates of the view of politics as power include feminists and Marxists. The rise of the women's liberation movement in the 1960s and 1970s, bringing with it a growing interest in feminism, stimulated more radical thinking about the nature of 'the political'. Not only have modern feminists sought to expand the arenas in which politics can be seen to take place, a notion most boldly asserted through the radical feminist slogan 'the personal is the political', but they have also tended to view politics as a process, specifically one related to the exercise of power over others. This view was summed by Kate Millett in *Sexual Politics* (1969), in which she defined politics as 'power-structured relationships, arrangements whereby one group of persons is controlled by another'.

Marxists, for their part, have used the term 'politics' in two senses. On one level, Marx (see p. 41) used 'politics' in a conventional sense to refer to the apparatus of the state. In the *Communist Manifesto* ([1848] 1967), he (and Engels) thus referred to political power as 'merely the organized power of one class for oppressing another'. For Marx, politics, together with law and culture, are part of a 'superstructure' that is distinct from the economic 'base' that is the real foundation of social life. However, he did not see the economic 'base' and the legal and political 'superstructure' as entirely separate. He believed that the 'superstructure' arose out of, and reflected, the economic 'base'. At a deeper level, political power, in this view, is therefore rooted in the class system; as Lenin (see p. 99) put it, 'politics is the most concentrated form of economics'. As opposed to believing that politics can be confined to the state and a narrow public sphere, Marxists can be said to believe that 'the economic is political'. From this perspective, civil society, characterized as Marxists believe it to be by class struggle, is the very heart of politics.

Views such as these portray politics in largely negative terms. Politics is, quite simply, about oppression and subjugation. Radical feminists hold that society is patriarchal, in that women are systematically subordinated and subjected to male power. Marxists traditionally argued that politics in a capitalist society is characterized by the exploitation of the proletariat by the bourgeoisie. On the other hand, these negative implications are balanced against the fact that politics is also seen as an emancipating force, a means through which injustice and domination can be challenged. Marx, for instance, predicted that class exploitation would be overthrown by a proletarian revolution, and radical feminists proclaim the need for gender relations to be reordered through a sexual revolution. However, it is also clear that when politics is portrayed as power and domination it need not be seen as an inevitable feature of social existence. Feminists look to an end of 'sexual politics' achieved through the construction of a non-sexist society, in which people will be valued according to personal worth, rather than on the basis of gender. Marxists believe that 'class politics' will end with the

establishment of a classless communist society. This, in turn, will eventually lead to the 'withering away' of the state, also bringing politics in the conventional sense to an end.

STUDYING POLITICS

Approaches to the study of politics

Disagreement about the nature of political activity is matched by controversy about the nature of politics as an academic discipline. One of the most ancient spheres of intellectual enquiry, politics was originally seen as an arm of philosophy, history or law. Its central purpose was to uncover the principles on which human society should be based. From the late nineteenth century onwards, however, this philosophical emphasis was gradually displaced by an attempt to turn politics into a scientific discipline. The high point of this development was reached in the 1950s and 1960s with an open rejection of the earlier tradition as meaningless metaphysics. Since then, however, enthusiasm for a strict science of politics has waned, and there has been a renewed recognition of the enduring importance of political values and normative theories. If the 'traditional' search for universal values acceptable to everyone has largely been abandoned, so has been the insistence that science alone provides a means of disclosing truth. The resulting discipline is more fertile and more exciting, precisely because it embraces a range of theoretical approaches and a variety of schools of analysis.

The philosophical tradition

The origins of political analysis date back to Ancient Greece and a tradition usually referred to as 'political philosophy'. This involved a preoccupation with essentially ethical, prescriptive or **normative** questions, reflecting a concern with what 'should', 'ought' or 'must' be brought about, rather than with what 'is'. Plato and Aristotle are usually identified as the founding fathers of this tradition. Their ideas resurfaced in the writings of medieval theorists such as Augustine (354–430) and Aquinas (1225–74). The central theme of Plato's work, for instance, was an attempt to describe the nature of the ideal society, which in his view took the form of a benign dictatorship dominated by a class of philosopher kings.

Such writings have formed the basis of what is called the 'traditional' approach to politics. This involves the analytical study of ideas and doctrines that have been central to political thought. Most commonly, it has taken the form of a history of political thought that focuses on a collection of 'major' thinkers (that spans, for instance, Plato to Marx) and a canon of 'classic' texts. This approach has the character of literary analysis: it is interested primarily in examining what major thinkers said, how they developed or justified their views, and the intellectual context within which they worked. Although such analysis may be carried out critically and scrupulously, it cannot be **objective** in any scientific sense, as it deals with normative questions such as 'Why should I obey the state?', 'How should rewards be distributed?' and 'What should the limits of individual freedom be?'

CONCEPT

Science

Science is a field of study that aims to develop reliable explanations of phenomena through repeatable experiments, observation and deduction. The 'scientific method', by which hypotheses are verified (proved true) by testing them against the available evidence, is therefore seen as a means of disclosing value-free and objective truth. Karl Popper (1902–94), however, suggested that science can only falsify hypotheses, since 'facts' may always be disproved by later experiments.

● **Normative**: The prescription of values and standards of conduct; what 'should be' rather than what 'is'.

● **Objective**: External to the observer, demonstrable; untainted by feelings, values or bias.

Debating . . .

Should students of politics seek to be objective and politically neutral?

Many believe that a strict distinction should be drawn between studying politics and practising politics, between having an academic interest in the subject and being politically engaged or committed. But does this distinction stand up to examination? Should we (teachers as well as students) approach the study of politics in a neutral manner, adopting a stance of 'scientific' objectivity? Or should we accept that, in politics, interest and commitment are inevitably linked, and even that political conviction may drive political understanding?

YES

Desire to explain. The motives for studying politics and practising politics are – or should be – different. Students of politics should seek, above all, to understand and explain the (all too often complex and baffling) political world. As they want to 'make sense' of things, any personal preferences they may hold must be treated as of strictly secondary importance. In contrast, practitioners of politics (politicians, activists and the like) are principally concerned with reshaping the political world in line with their own convictions or preferences. Political convictions thus blind people to 'inconvenient' truths, allowing political analysis to service the needs of political advocacy.

Objective knowledge. There is an approach to the acquisition of knowledge that has unrivalled authority in the form of scientific method, and this should be applied to all areas of learning, politics (or 'political science') included. Using observation, measurement and experimentation, scientific method allows hypotheses to be verified or falsified by comparing them with what we know about the 'real world'. Systematic enquiry, guided by such scientific principles, is the only reliable means of producing and accumulating knowledge. This knowledge is 'objective' because it is generated through a value-free approach that is concerned with empirical questions and does not seek to make normative judgements.

Free-floating intellectuals. Education and intellectual enquiry are themselves a training-ground in dispassionate scholarship, allowing students and teachers to distance themselves, over time, from the allegiances and biases that derive from social and family backgrounds. The German sociologist Karl Mannheim (1893–1947) thus argued that objectivity is strictly the preserve of the 'socially unattached intelligentsia', a class of intellectuals who alone can engage in disciplined and dispassionate enquiry. As free-floating intellectuals, they can stand back from the world they seek to understand, and thereby see it more clearly.

NO

Myth of neutrality. Whereas natural scientists may be able to approach their studies from an objective and impartial standpoint, this is impossible in politics. However politics is defined, it addresses questions about the structure and functioning of the society in which we live and have grown up. Family background, social experience, economic position, political sympathies and so on therefore build into each and every one of us preconceptions about the political world we are seeking to study. Indeed, perhaps the greatest threat to reliable knowledge comes not from bias as such, but from the failure to acknowledge bias, reflected in bogus claims to political neutrality.

Emancipatory knowledge. Very few people are drawn to the study of politics through a disinterested quest for knowledge alone. Instead, they seek knowledge for a purpose, and that purpose invariably has a normative component. As Marx famously put it, 'The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it'. Such an approach is most clearly embraced by modern critical theorists, who adopt an explicit commitment to emancipatory politics. The purpose of critical theory is to uncover structures of oppression and injustice in domestic and global politics in order to advance the cause of individual and collective freedom.

Competing realities. Post-positivist theorists question the very idea of scientific objectivity, arguing that there is more than one way in which the world can be understood. There is thus no single, overarching truth about the 'real world' out there, separate from the beliefs, ideas and assumptions of the observer. If the subject (the student of politics) cannot in any reliable way be distinguished from the object (the political world), then dispassionate scholarship must be treated as, at best, an unachievable ideal, social and political analysis being an inevitably value-laden activity.