Politics and political science

**1 What is Politics?**

DEF: *ongoing competition between people, usually in groups to shape policy in their favour, can be found whenever human competition plays out*

can be identified in different contexts: government and nongovernment (families, workplace, classroom etc)

* 1. **Political Power**

DEF: *ability of one person to get another to condition other’s behaviour* (Machiavelli)

Critics of the idea of political power appreciate the idea of self-governing and self-regulating communities, but these do not seem to last: political power seems to be built into the human condition, so why do some people hold political power over others?

BIOLOGICAL:

Aristotle: “man is by nature a political animal”

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Humans need each other for sustenance and survival, and it is natural that they arrange each other in ranks of leaders and followers like animals.

The modern biological explanation following from Aristotle claims that forming a political system and obeying its leaders are innate behaviour that are passed with the genes.

Humans are imperfectly social animals, for example when they disobey their leader.

PHYCHOLOGICAL:

Closely related to the biological explanation: both derive from evolution in the formation of political groups.

Milgram study: people are willing to surrender their actions to an authority figure and most individuals are naturally conformist, they see things from a group’s perspective, ignoring doubter who tell them an idea will fail. Groupthink suggests that human needs fit into groups and norms (EX. the Holocaust).

CULTURAL:

DEF: *human behaviour is learned as opposed to inherited*

“Nurture vs. nature debate”: how much of human behaviour is learned and not inherited?

20th century dominant view – all differences in behaviour are cultural, political communities are held together based on values that are transmitted and learnt by factors like religion, child upbringing, economic development etc.

Optimism of the theory is all human behaviour is created, bad behaviour can be unlearned, and society can improve in a slow change through generations.

Problems of the theory:

- where does culture come from?

- If all behaviour is cultural, political systems should all be different based on different cultures

- in the political field we see similar political attitudes in countries with quite different cultures

RATIONAL:

DEF: *approach to politics* *based on the ability to reason, people know what they want most of the time and they have good reasons for what they do*

EX. Hobbes and Locke: humans form civil societies because their powers of reason tell them that it is much better than anarchy. People form governments to safeguard life and property, and when they are not satisfied with them anymore, they have the right to dissolve them and form new ones.

- Locke’s view on the topic influence the U.S Founding Fathers

IRRATIONAL:

DEF: *based on the power to use fear and myth to cloud reason*

Dominant view of the late 19th century: people are irrational, especially when it comes to politics: they are emotional, dominated by stereotypes and crows are easily dominated by strong leaders (EX. Mussolini, Hitler, and Bin Laden)

Problems of the theory:

- this theory easily leads to war, economic ruin, and tyranny

1. **What is Political Science?**

DEF: *political science is a method of how to study politics and the analysis of politics*, *how it grows, how it does damage, understand the forces of nature that condition politics and work with them to improve humankind’s existence.*

* 1. **The Master Science**

Aristotle called politics “the master science” because almost everything happens in a political context, the decisions of the polis govern everything else (economics too is especially liked to politics”.

Harold Laswell said that politics is the study of “who gets what”.

* 1. **Can politics be studied as a science?**

There have been attempts at studying politics as natural science: to quantify data and manipulate them statistically to validate a hypothesis.

One of the problems is that small areas of politics are quantifiable but big ones are not (ex. congressional votes vs “how do leaders make their decisions?”)

Political science is an empirical discipline that accumulates both quantified and qualitative data, with which we can find patters and then generalize. Once generalizations become stabler they can be called theories. In the few cases in which theories become definitive they can be called laws.

* 1. **The struggle to see clearly.**

An enquiry should be reasoned, balanced, supported with evidence, and a little theoretical.

REASONED:

The reasoning must be evident and spelled out, if there are assumptions in the reasoning, they must be made known to minimize bias.

+ info: Weber said that any finding that supports the researcher’s political views mist be discarded as biased.

BALANCED:

Bias can also be minimized by looking at the topic from other perspectives, mentioning different approaches and what previous research have found. Moreover, knowledge of the literature can be useful and to criticize previous studies and explaining your opinion.

SUPPORTED WITH EVIDENCE:

Studies require both quantified and qualitative evidence, with declared sources.

THEORETICAL:

Enquiries are always connected to theoretical topics, given that new studies should enlarge knowledge on the discipline or refute past theories.

* 1. **What is good Political Science?**

Professional political scientists should push their views aside while doing a research to archive an objective analysis. Political science can be a key element in support of politicians (ex. erosion of trust in government in the USA in the mid-60s’)

* 1. **Subfields of political science**

- US politics

- comparative politics

- international relations

- political theory

- public administration

- constitutional law

- public policy

**3. Theory in Political Science**

DEF: *Theories are not facts themselves but provide structure that give meaning to patterns of facts and give suggestions on how these facts should be organized*

There are different theories that scientists use to understand patterns in the political world:

BEHAVIOURISM:

DEF: *empirical study of actual human behaviour rather than abstract or speculative theories.*

19th century – middle 20th century theory focused on institutions and on constitutions because they assumed what was on paper was how things worked.

Stalinism, Fascism and Nazism shook this belief and forced scientists to re-examine their focus. Post-war scientists followed August Comte’s positivist method to study society in an applying natural science methods with the aim of bettering society.

Behaviourists were good to examine social bases, attitudes, and value of citizen and in voting patterns but were also criticized because they focused on minor topics, which resulted in their studies being almost irrelevant.

Critiques: in the late 60’s it came under attack by young political scientists for its conservative and static approach which made it impossible to tackle urgent tasks.

They examine only what is present at a given time, excluding the possibility for chance, tending to accept only the status quo, and appreciating already well-established democratic systems.

POSTBEHAVIOURALISM:

DEF: *movement born in 1969 as a synthesis of traditional, behavioural, and other techniques in the study of politics*

NEW INSTITUTIONALISM:

Revival of the focus on institutions in the 1970s

Government structures have lives of their own and shape the attitudes of the people who live within and benefit from them. Institutions are not simply the reflection of social forces.

SYSTEM THEORY:

The post-war invention of political systems by David Easton contributed to our understanding of politics by simplifying things, the idea comes from biology: looking at complex entities as systems and highly integrated living organisms that perform their function in a way that keeps the being alive. You cannot change one component otherwise all the other change as well.

System theory states that the politics of a given country work a loop, like in a biological being citizen’s demands (*inputs*) are recognized by the government decision makers, who process them into decisions and actions (*outputs*). These outputs influence the social economic and political environment on the outside. The feedbacks can come back positive, negative, or positive and according to it, the government can take further actions to rectify the decisions.

The system is very static and biased towards the status quo but also the public reacts only later the decision has been made. Easton also added the existence of *within-puts*, pressures from parts within the government itself.

RATIONAL-CHOICE THEORY:

DEF: *we can generally predict political behaviour by knowing the interests of the actors involved because they rationally maximize their interests*

From the 1970s many rational-choice theories back out of their position and now define themselves as new institutionalists because all their choices are made within an institutional context. Rational-choice theory did not define a new paradigm but was important to remind that politicians are often opportunists.

Some rational-choice theorist later subscribed to a branch of mathematics called game theory.

GAME THEORY:

Game theory approaches political decisions as if they were table games. Seeing how the players interact gives us insight of what can go wrong in crisis decision making.

Constructing the proper game explains why policy outcomes are often unforeseen but not accidental. Games can also show how decision makers think. These games can also be mathematized and put into computers.

The weak point of game theory is that it relies on the payoff that decision makers can expect, and these are only approximations arrived at by examining historical records, for this reason game theory can be seen an alternative way to clarify history.

**4. “Political theory” vs theory in political science**

political scientists study politics by trying to understand how things do work = descriptive approach

political theorists approach the study of politics from the perspective of how things should work = normative approach

**4.1 The normative study of politics**

Greece:

Some say Plato founded political science but, in his work, “Republic”, he approaches the idea of polis from a normative point of view. On the other hand, Aristotle was the first empirical political scientist: he gathered data on which he based his work “Politics” which combined descriptive and normative approaches. Seeing the decline of Athens, the started to look for a good and stable political system.

Middle Ages/Renaissance:

Most scientists in this age took a religious approach to the study of politics and were mostly normative, trying to find which system of government would be closer to what God wanted.

Machiavelli in his work “The prince” focused about getting and managing political power. He argued that it is almost impossible to be both a good politician and a good person in the traditional sense. He the argued about his concept of virtù for politicians, which includes wisdom, strategy, strength, bravery but also ruthlessness. He uses the term “criminal virtue” to express the need of a leader that knows how to be cruel in the name of the state and yet good as a leader.

He was a realist: he worked with the world as it was and not as he wished it to be and he argued that to accomplish anything good the Prince had to be rational, though in the exercise of power and that the main task of the ruler is to defend the state from external and internal threats.

According to Machiavelli a good leader is the one that knows how to defend, enrich, and bring honour to the state. Ultimately what keeps people from disobeying is terror.

**4.2 The contractualists**

They analysed why political systems existed at all. They agreed that all humans have joined in a social contract that everyone had to observe.

HOBBES:

To what extent should we obey rulers? When should we start revolutions and oppose governments?

traditional theory: it is god that appoints all kings and that one should obey the rules because God said so (*the divine right of kings*)

This theory was not so convincing anymore, people started to think that the right to rule did not lay in the king himself but in ordinary people who gave the king power, so they should obey him if his ruling was just (*social contract theory of government*)

In “Leviathan”, Hobbes imagined that in the state of nature, so humans before civilization, before civil society was founded life was not good, all men were enemies. To get out of this situation humans decided to enter a social contract and form a civil society and even submit themselves to a king to escape anarchy, hence society was born out of fear.

LOCKE:

Who should rule a country? And on what legitimate basis?

Locke tried to answer in his “Two treaties of government”. He considered the divine right of kings and Hobbes’s theory.

Locke thought that the original state of nature was not that bad, and people lived in equality and tolerance, but they could not secure their own property and to escape the uncertainty of ownership humans formed a civil society and secured “life, liberty and property”, and they willingly cede part of their rights to rulers to better preserve their rights. If government turned into tyranny the people had the right to over their own the leader and form new governments

ROUSSEAU:

Rousseau thought that life in the state of nature was good and people lived without jealousy, the element that corrupted humans was society itself, since it made them sinful and vicious. What corrupted humankind was an unhealthy self-love, which was centred around vanity and jealousy. This self-love emerged with the birth of cities, where individuals started comparing themselves to others. He also added that society can be improved to lead to human freedom. A good society would be a society with a general will where humans gain dignity and freedom.

CONFUCIUS:

In his “Analects”, Confucius based his vision of a stable, good government on two things:

1. the family
2. the moral behaviours instilled in rulers and ruled: the emperor sets a moral example and if he does not his empire will crumble. He will be copied by his subjects, down to the father of the family, which is the “emperor” of the family to whom wife and children are subjected since moral life beings in the family.

**4.3 Marxist theories**

Marx developed his theory around three pillars:

- a theory of economics

- a theory of social class

- a theory of history

Like for Hegel’s zeitgeist (theory according to which each epoch had a distinctive spirit which moves history along) Marx said that his epoch’s cause was economics.

ECONOMICS:

Marx focused on the surplus value or profit. He argued that the proletariat (working class) work paired with low wages resulted in repeated overproduction which leads to depression. Eventually there will be a depression so big that the capitalistic system will collapse.

SOCIAL CLASS:

Every society is divided into two classes: the bourgeoisie (small class of those who own the means of production) and the proletariat (large class the works for the bourgeoisie).

Society is run by the first class that needs to maintain itself in a position of power, and most laws are property laws because the elite is so attached to their goods (ex. war is a bourgeoise need for economic gain). The proletariat had no country, they all suffer under the elite.

HISTORY:

By analysing economic and social conditions Marx explained historical changes.

When the proletariat shift position in respect to what the dominant class has established the system collapses (ex. the French Revolution).

Marxism when applied in the Soviet Union and Communist countries led to tyranny and failure but it can be useful if seen as an analysis.

Marxism contributions:

1. He highlighted how societies are never fully unified and peaceful but always riven with conflict.
2. We must ask “who benefits” in any political controversy.

Marxism weaknesses:

1. Capitalism has not collapsed: Marx did not get the flexibility and adaptive nature of the system.
2. Marx did not grasp that capitalism is not just one single system but is many: French, American, and Japanese capitalisms are distinct from each other.