

I

Introduction: Studying Politics

No one is unaffected by politics. Speaking very broadly, it is about the way people organize their lives together in a community. The important collective decisions shaping the very quality of life – concerning wealth, health, education, morality – are all essentially political in their nature. Studying and talking about politics are a necessary part of the good life which we seek. To be denied the right to do this is one of the first symptoms of oppression. This chapter aims to ponder the essential nature of the subject and the terms and concepts associated with its study. These include power, authority, legitimacy, the state, and society. Finally we address the actual study of politics.

What is Politics?

Encountering politics

Human social life is not a tranquil experience. People seem able to argue and disagree over most things – education, nuclear weapons, the National Health Service, race, gender, the European Union, genetic engineering, the north–south divide, the future of Northern Ireland, and so on *ad infinitum*. Differences are voiced in arguments in pubs and clubs and MPs are elected to continue the arguments in Parliament. Even religious leaders enter the fray; the Church of England's 1985 report, *Faith in the City*, was a damning indictment of inner-city decay and neglect.

Not only do people argue, they resort to violence. Today we see demonstrations, race riots, attacks on the police, attacks by the police and bitter strikes. We see blood and death as people fight for their rights, the rights of others or even the rights of animals. Some are prepared to die. In 1913 Emily Wilding

2 Introduction: Studying Politics

Ben Bradshaw MP and Charles Secrett of Friends of the Earth demonstrating in support of the Road Traffic Reduction (National Targets) Bill, January 1998



Photo: Jennifer Bates/Friends of the Earth

Davison fatally flung herself under the hooves of the King's horse in the Derby and other women threatened to starve themselves to death in Britain's prisons because they wanted the right to vote. In February 1995 animal rights campaigner Jill Phipps was martyred beneath the wheels of a lorry carrying veal calves for export. People, and even the government, will also kill for their beliefs, as planted bombs and shoot-to-kill policies testify. Throughout all, the unblinking eye of the mass media watches, reports and incites.

These widely-disparate patterns of behaviour, involving matters great and small, serious and trivial, originating at home or abroad, involving ordinary people and the high and the mighty, which may be enacted within the great state institutions of Westminster, Whitehall and the Inns of Court, or in streets and factories, share little in common except for one thing: along with countless other such examples they would be recognized as *events in politics*. It is clear that if we are to study this subject seriously it is necessary to make some order of a world of bewildering complexity; to try to distil the essence of the activity known as *politics*. This is by no means easy; scholars continue to dispute the definition of politics.

I hope I will not destroy faith in the omniscience of professors entirely if I now confess that I do not really know what my subject is.

F. F. Ridley, 'The importance of constitutions', *Parliamentary Affairs* (1966: 312)

Politics arises from certain basic facts of human existence: that people generally choose (indeed find it necessary for survival) to live together and that they differ in myriad ways in their opinions as to how the community should be organized and the nature of the decisions it makes. The source of conflict may either be the simple fact that individuals are self-interested and greedy, never able to feel content with their lot, or that they hold differing views on big moral questions. Disputes are inevitable because the world's resources are finite (no one can have all he or she wants) and the range of opinion on moral questions is limitless.

However, when we come to address directly the fundamental question 'What is politics?' we find it impossible to give a simple answer. Politics can be seen variously as concerned with the art of *compromise*, the exercise of *authority*, the acquisition of *power* and as a form of devious *deception*. It is not the case that any one of these categories of definition is correct and the others wrong, but rather that politics is a many-sided concept, only to be understood if viewed from various angles.

Politics as compromise: the 'art of the possible'

Politics as 'the art of the possible' is a well-known but enigmatic definition (authorship of which is attributed variously) and retains its relevance because it encapsulates a particular view of politics as a process of participating and finding agreement which has been attractive to western minds since the time of the famous Ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle (384–322 BC). Amongst modern thinkers it is most eloquently expressed by Bernard Crick:

Politics is not just a necessary evil; it is a realistic good. Political activity is a type of moral activity; it is a free activity, and it is inventive, flexible, enjoyable, and human. (Crick 1964: 141)

However, if such a view were rigidly adhered to, there would be little material for political scientists to study in the real world of violence, murder, duplicity and self-interest. Yet this definition remains important for several reasons.

- ◆ It defines the pure essence of politics.
- ◆ It stands as an ethical ideal.
- ◆ It provides a measure against which real-world systems may be judged.

The view of politics as a compromising and conciliatory activity might suggest that it is opposed to the idea of sovereignty and rule by a central authority. This is wrong because differences cannot be reconciled without some overarching authority, even if this is no more than the idea of *agreement* (or contract) reached between the parties. This leads to a second definition.

Politics as authority

David Easton, an influential American political scientist, argued that politics was concerned with the ‘**authoritative allocation of values**’ (1953: 129). **Authority** is the right of some person or institution (king or government) to make decisions affecting the community. A woman with a gun, or a man with a large wallet, may be able to get their own way but will not have authority if those obeying do so with a sense of grievance. Such rule is unstable; those subjected may be expected to revolt when they glimpse their chance. Authority is derived from legitimacy.

Legitimacy When a government enjoys **legitimacy** people will obey because they believe it right to be ruled in this way. This is a key to the success of any political system, and explains why military dictatorships taking power by force are soon seeking the appearance of democratic civilian rule.

The strongest is never strong enough to be always the master, unless he transforms strength into right, and obedience into duty.

Jean Jacques Rousseau (French philosopher and writer), *The Social Contract* (1762: ch. 3)

Forms of authority The great sociologist Max Weber (1864–1920) distinguished three kinds of authority: *rational legal* (bestowed by normative rules, such as constitutions and election); *traditional* (conferred by history, habit and custom – like a hereditary monarchy); and *charismatic* (where the personal qualities of the leader inspire the confidence, and even adulation, of the masses).

Of course, to say that a government enjoys legitimacy does not necessarily imply that it is a *good* government; legitimacy merely resides in popular consciousness. Hence political regimes will devote considerable time and energy not to making policies for the people’s education, welfare, and so on, but to the shaping of attitudes – the process of **legitimation**. We shall see that a great deal of British political life serves this end. For example, when Elizabeth II was crowned by the Archbishop of Canterbury the British people witnessed a tradition whereby the monarchs of old sought to present their earthly power as a manifestation of the will of God.

While it is clear that the exercise of authority is part of politics, this presents a rather legalistic and simplistic picture. Governments cannot always expect to possess legitimacy; in a complex society there will be elements opposed to the government of the day, questioning and challenging it and even seeking to destroy it. Governments can aim to maintain themselves by deception of the masses and by force. This leads to an analysis of one of the most central concepts in politics – power.

Politics as power

American political scientist Harold Lasswell (1936) gave the discipline a memorable catch-phrase in the title of his book *Politics: Who Gets What, When, How?* Here the essence of politics is **power**, and those who get most of what is going are the powerful. Power can be defined as the ability to achieve some desired effect, regardless of the opposition. Authority is one form of power, but a glance at the world today quickly reveals that many regimes are based on cruder forms such as wealth, gender, physical might and violence.

I put for a general inclination of all mankind,* a perpetual and restless desire for power after power, that ceaseth only in death.

Thomas Hobbes (English philosopher), *Leviathan* (1651: ch. 11)

Concentration on pure power takes us beyond the trappings of government into shadowy corners behind the throne. The authority of the government is often nothing more than an empty legal (*de jure*) title; the real (*de facto*) power to get what is wanted, when it is wanted, lies elsewhere. Although some are content to study only the trappings of the state, it should be a central task of political analysis to track down the real source of power, to find the constitutional Mr Big, though the trail can often resemble the Yellow Brick Road to the elusive end of the rainbow.

We will discover later in this book that the most important approaches to the study of politics centre around hypotheses about where real power lies. Does it lie with the people, *some* of the people, a particular race, the male sex, the armed forces, the talented, the wealthy, the aristocracy, Parliament, the Cabinet, the prime minister, the civil service, the mass media, the professional classes, the managers of industry, the controllers of capital, and so on? Alternatively, does it lie outside the state territory altogether with superpowers like the USA, international groupings like NATO, or mighty transnational corporations with budgets dwarfing those of many nations? We shall find that power – like wealth – is unevenly distributed; some people have much while others have little.

Politics as deception

A popular use of the term ‘political’ denotes devious, shifty behaviour generally aimed at securing personal advantage – usually position or office. Many of Shakespeare’s plays dwell on the intrigue in politics so that Enoch Powell could say in a 1950s BBC series: ‘The stage used to be called the Court, now they call it a Cabinet, but all the characters are in Shakespeare... Only the costumes

*The terminology in this and other quotations is not intended to exclude women; it is merely an example of sexist language and is itself a manifestation of male power (see chapters 2 and 7).

Get thee glass eyes;
And, like a scurvy politician, seem
To see the things thou dost not.

King Lear in Shakespeare's *King Lear*

date.' Such activity can take place at the micro level (within government organizations), as well as the macro level (between rulers and the ruled).

Deception in micro-politics It was probably in this sense that the word 'politics' first appeared in English, as a term of disapproval applied to the activities of those engaged in faction, intrigue and opposition to established governments. People who are 'politicking' are usually understood to be plotting against rivals. The term is often applied to the behaviour of individuals in large organizations, where those engaged in politics (from planning to oust the chairman to gaining a larger desk) are unlikely to be contributing to the organization's collective goal. Much activity of this kind takes place within the corridors and tearooms of the Palace of Westminster, and in the clubs and bedsits around about. Indeed the British Cabinet itself was originally a secretive group of ministers scheming together as a *cabal*.

One has to be a bit of a lowbrow, a bit of a murderer, to be a politician, ready and willing to see people sacrificed, slaughtered for the sake of an idea.

Henry Miller (1891–1980; American writer), *Writers at Work*

This view is often linked with the ideas of the Italian Renaissance thinker Niccolò Machiavelli; to be labelled 'Machiavellian' is usually taken as insulting. However, Machiavelli's essential point was that intrigue and plotting were justified by the greater purposes of government (see chapter 2). In other words, he believed the old adage that the ends justify the means: 'when the act accuses, the end excuses'. This leads to deception at the level of macro-politics.

Deception in macro-politics This is by far the more important in the outcomes of politics and was captured by the great nineteenth-century prime minister Benjamin Disraeli in the aphorism that politics was 'the art of governing mankind through deceiving them'. Legitimation itself can be seen as

I have lots of enemies.... Hurd has always been against me, told the lady [Margaret Thatcher] not to make me Minister for Trade – which she very splendidly repeated to me on the evening of my appointment. Arsehole. He's looking more and more like Aldridge Prior.

Alan Clark on ministerial rivalries, *Diaries* (1 Feb. 1991)

The erosion of public confidence in the holders of public office is a serious matter. In so far as a culture of moral vagueness, a culture of sleaze has developed, we seek to put an end to it.

The Nolan Committee on Standards in Public Life, quoted in the *Guardian*
(12 May 1995)

a form of deception. The perceptive English political essayist Walter Bagehot (1826–77) placed particular stress on deception of the masses as a key to successful government (see p. 63). Today, as the term ‘spin doctor’ enters common parlance, one is presented with a great mist of deceptive activity (including official secrecy) and the attempt to shine a searchlight through it is one of the principal duties of the political scientist.

As we conclude this discussion on the nature of politics, it should be apparent that all our definitions are inextricably interwoven. There is no doubt that society harbours many conflicting interests which must be reconciled, often by the exercise of authority, and the process is clouded by evidence of great inequality of power and much devious behaviour.

Politics is the art of preventing people from taking part in affairs which properly concern them.

Paul Valéry
(1871–1945;
French writer),
Tel quel

What do political scientists study?

Individuals and groups disagree over ends and means in most walks of life. There are countless institutions that can resolve such conflict, including religious groups, trade unions, clubs, schools, universities, business firms, families, and so on. Does this mean that these are political institutions? Some academics do in fact study the politics of small communities, usually taking a psychological perspective, but the particular focus of attention for the political scientist is the **state** – a very special, unique, and profoundly important social formation.

The state

A state is a community formed for the purpose of government. The Ancient Greeks talked of the **city-state** (sometimes termed the **polity**, from the Greek *polis*) and today we speak of the **nation-state**, a relatively recent formation. Philosophers dispute the nature of the state (see chapter 2), the German Hegel giving it a particularly metaphysical significance as the highest expression of ethics; only through allegiance to, and service in, the state could individuals fully realize themselves. Generally the state is taken to be a community with the following characteristics (Lasswell and Kaplan 1950: 181).

- ◆ A clearly defined territory.
- ◆ A legitimate government.

- ◆ Sovereignty within its territory.
- ◆ An existence recognized by other states in international law.
- ◆ A ‘persona’, in which name it is able to make treaties and have obligations and rights independent of any actual person. Thus we speak of the state doing this and that: prosecuting people (state prosecution), providing welfare (welfare state), being sinned against (crimes against the state), keeping secrets (state secrets), educating citizens (state education), and so on.
- ◆ Perpetual succession – rulers may change but the state continues to exist, with no alteration to its commitments and responsibilities.
- ◆ Universality – all those living within the jurisdiction of the state (there are some exceptions for diplomats) are subject to its rules. Unlike other associations (say, sports clubs or a church), members do not have the right to opt out of state jurisdiction (unless they emigrate, though in this case they would soon come under some other state).
- ◆ The right to use force and coercion against members. Weber saw this as the most singular characteristic of the state, distinguishing it from all other organizations. If other agencies, say bouncers outside a disco, teachers, or even parents, use force, they may find themselves subject to the law, but the state can legally imprison, harass, and sometimes kill. From this it becomes starkly obvious that operating the state apparatus confers great and threatening power.

Today some argue that a process of globalization (see chapter 4) through economics and technology and the horror of modern weaponry make the concept of the nation-state dangerously outmoded. With the increasing role of international associations and transnational groupings, the borders of modern states are becoming softened (Giddens 1998: 130). Moreover, human rights and security concerns lead states or groups of states to demand rights of inspection over others.

The state and society The notion of the state may be differentiated from that of society; the former is constructed and based upon law, while the latter arises naturally from the free association of people (sometimes termed *civil society*). In the state, individual members stand as *citizens* with legally prescribed rights and obligations, but no such conditions attach to them as members of society, where they are constrained more by economic and ethical norms. The same distinction was made by the German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies (1855–1936), who spoke of *Gesellschaft* (a community formed by artificial, human contract) and *Gemeinschaft* (a community arising from bonds of affection or kinship). The national community is both state *and* society, a fact that is a source of friction. While all citizens are legally equal, as members of society they can be decidedly unequal. When the legal equality of citizenship is markedly at variance with the real level of societal equality, there will be the potential for political tension.

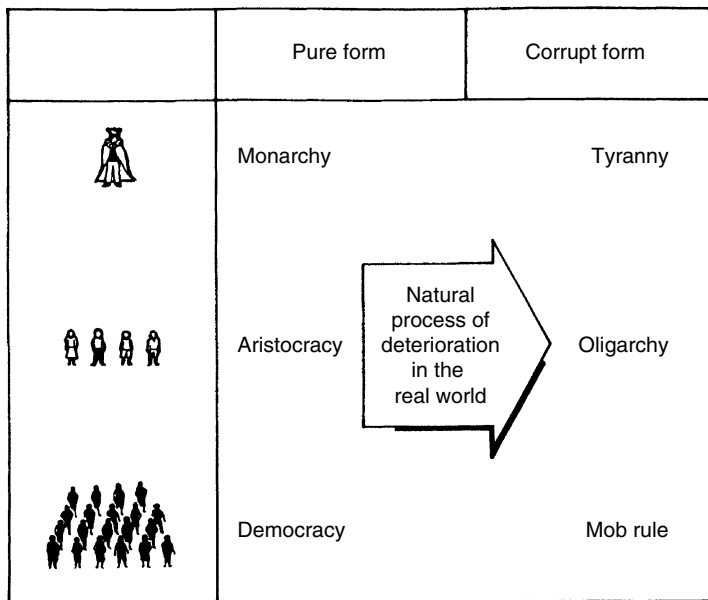


Figure 1.1
Forms of government.

Government

The idea of **government** lies at the heart of political science. Indeed no society has ever been found that did not have some kind of government (Mair 1970). It can take various forms: it may be *constitutional* (limited by laws, see pp. 68–73), *absolutist* (unlimited by laws), *primitive* (a chieftain’s rule over a tribe), or *pluralist* (consisting of several institutions sharing the role). Following Aristotle, it is customary to group forms of government in terms of the number of rulers, thus distinguishing **monarchy** (rule by one person), **aristocracy** (rule by an enlightened few) and **democracy** (rule by all the people – the *demos*). However, each of these may be said to tend in practice towards a corrupt variant: **tyranny**, **oligarchy** and **mob rule** (figure 1.1).

Politics and the fate of mankind are shaped by men without ideals and without greatness. Men who have greatness within them don’t go in for politics.

Albert Camus (1913–60; French philosopher and writer), *Notebooks*, 1935–42

Government and self-interest The fatal deterioration of the forms of government is usually attributed to the corrupting influences of power, which may lead those holding it to act in their own interests rather than that of the community. The historian Lord Acton (1834–1902) observed memorably:

Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Great men are almost always bad men.

The selfish tendency of human beings is a hard truth that forms the starting point for much political thought. The key issue is reconciling the common good with the need for government. Scottish philosopher David Hume (1711–76) believed that ‘every man ought to be supposed a knave and to have no end other than private interest’, arguing that it was crucial for a state to devise a form of government that would inhibit the corrupting tendencies.

A republican and free government would be an obvious absurdity, if the particular checks and controuls [*sic*], provided by the constitution, had really no influence, and made it not in the interest, even of bad men, to act for the public good. (Hume 1882 edn: 6–7)

The Philosophical Radicals of the nineteenth century (see chapter 2) took the individual pursuit of self-interest as the key to understanding human behaviour. This idea was very influential in shaping many of our modern institutions.

Government and politics Government will necessarily entail politics, even in primitive societies where institutions have taken only the most rudimentary form. In developed societies, politics is often seen as being about the formal working of the **machinery of government** – taking control of it, influencing its decisions, reforming it, changing those in office, and so on. However, it is important to remember that politics does not belong exclusively to the world of institutions. From the boardrooms of industry to the clubs, pubs and laundrettes – politics is found wherever people gather and express their anger, hopes and anxieties, and assess their potential to influence events.

The state and the government

The state and the government are conceptually distinct. In the UK, the position of the Queen, who plays no effective part in government yet is head of state, underlines the distinction. For practical purposes the British government is usually regarded as the collection of around a hundred secretaries of state, ministers, junior ministers and their various assistants drawn from Parliament. In contrast, the state can be seen to comprise a much wider set of institutions (the civil service, the Bank of England, local authorities, health authorities, various quasi-autonomous bodies, nationalized industries, the judiciary, the military and the police). Some would go further and include the mass media, the institutions of the capitalist economy and trade unions (Middlemass 1979).

The political and the non-political

It will be apparent that if politics is about reconciling diverse interests it must have many manifestations; indeed no area of life can be seen as intrinsically non-political. Some people find this thought peculiarly disturbing and it is common to hear calls to ‘take education (or health, or the siting of power stations, and so on) out of politics’. If something is to be taken out of politics, where is it to go? We have seen that politics is a process whereby differences and conflicts are resolved through conciliation, the exercise of authority and power. However, politics is by no means the only way of resolving such differences; there are three particularly important alternatives.

- ◆ The *economic market place* allows the forces of supply and demand to set prices and determine who gets what.
- ◆ Through *rational decision-making* experts weigh up the pros and cons of a case to arrive at the ‘best’ solution.
- ◆ *Violence* enables the unsatisfied, dispossessed or greedy to attempt to take what they want by physical force.

All these are present in Britain today, though each has limitations.

The market The eighteenth- and nineteenth-century classical economists believed the **market** to be a wondrous mechanism for bringing buyers and sellers together at a mutually acceptable price resulting in the optimum allocation of resources within society. However, this raises difficult ethical problems. In the first place it is undemocratic, favouring the economically strong against the weak because it does not *redistribute* resources; it gives only unto him or her that already hath (that is, can afford the price). Thus, rather than taking matters out of politics, it creates a new basis for dissatisfaction and conflict. Secondly, not all allocations can be determined by the laws of supply and demand. Matters such as the level of sex and violence on television, the decision whether to send troops to Iraq, the degree of religious toleration to be allowed within society, or the age of consent for homosexuals lie in a territory of value-judgement and morality where the market is quite silent. When governments try to bring the market into areas such as education and health care many people are deeply disturbed. Indeed, because the human capacity to disagree over value-judgements is potentially limitless, there are infinitely more areas of dispute to be settled by politics than by the market.

Rational decision-making The idea of making communal decisions on the basis of rational criteria seems very attractive; it is the argument for the use of experts (town planners, architects and the like). Organizational theorist Herbert Simon (1947) believed that state decision-makers should arm

Market sovereignty is not a complement to liberal democracy: it is an alternative to it.

Eric Hobsbawm in the *New Statesman* (5 March 2001)

themselves with all the available information, calculate the outcomes of all possible courses of action, and choose the best policy for the community. However, in practice certain intractable problems beset such processes.

- ◆ The principle is essentially elitist and paternalistic, based on the notion that certain people know what is best for the masses.
- ◆ It is difficult to decide who the experts should be; obviously election cannot be the answer.
- ◆ In reality, experts can never be sure that they have all the information necessary to make the ‘right’ decisions.
- ◆ Experts may be tempted to place their own personal interests before those of the community.
- ◆ Experts frequently disagree with each other.

Rational decision-making also carries with it connotations of a threatening ‘Big Brother’ style of bureaucratic rule as depicted in George Orwell’s novel *1984*. Both fascist and totalitarian communist governments can be accused of trying to govern by putting experts in charge, while the call to replace politics with managerialism is ever-present in Britain.

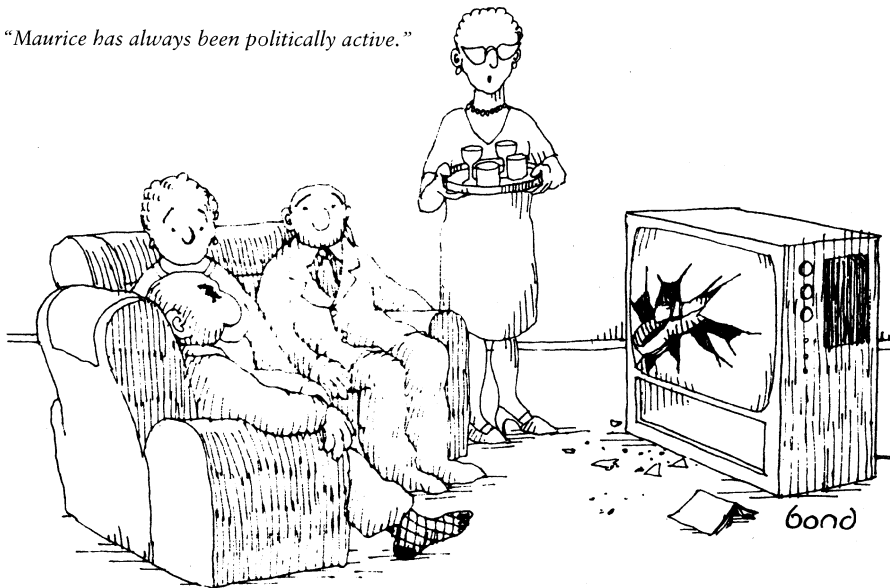
War is nothing more than the continuation of politics by other means.

Karl von Clausewitz (1780–1831; German military expert), *Vom Kriege*

Violence In the real world there can be little doubt that making and enacting collective decisions for communities is often accomplished by various forms of physical force and **state violence**. Two world wars, the Nazi extermination of the Jews, the treatment of blacks in South Africa, the silencing of dissidents in Eastern Europe, the brutality of the Tiananmen Square massacre or the ethnic cleansing in former Yugoslavia can leave no one in any doubt of this harsh reality. Historically Britain has been a very violent nation and the Suez invasion, Northern Ireland and the Falklands war have revealed modern politicians still willing to seek violent solutions to political problems. After the Falklands war, Mrs Thatcher employed the language of force on the home front, speaking of the ‘enemy within’. This turned out to be the miners, who were to find themselves embroiled in a physical confrontation with the police and security services.

As an alternative to participating in conventional political processes, guerrilla warfare is increasingly chosen by groups wishing to gain their ends or make their voices heard. Today nobody is immune; several thousand civilians have been killed over Northern Ireland, hijacks and atrocities such as the Lockerbie air disaster can occur anywhere, and in 1989 the Ayatollah Khomeini set a chilling precedent with his *fatwa* on author Salman Rushdie because his book *The Satanic Verses* gave religious offence. Most dramatically of all, the events of 11 September 2001 sent reverberations throughout the political system, challenging norms and testing conventions. It was said that things could never be the same again. However, like the market and the rational decision-making model, violence is not very effective at resolving problems. Violence breeds more violence and, when the fighting has ceased, the parties must sit round the conference table to seek a durable solution. This has been the case in both the Northern Ireland and Arab–Israeli conflicts, despite the high price paid in blood.

"Maurice has always been politically active."



Reproduced by permission of *Punch*

Is there really a world beyond politics?

It will become apparent throughout this book that when reformers believe they are taking an issue out of the sordid world of politics by handing it over to the market or the experts they delude themselves. Similarly, the idea that violence is not part of politics is unrealistic. Hence, in defining what is political we must be guided not by the nature of the issue but by the way people react to it. If we accept that politics is about reconciling diverse interests then it follows that anything can become political. The world that some believe to exist outside politics is a fantasy land, as inaccessible as that discovered by Alice when she went through the looking-glass.

Man is by nature a political animal.

Aristotle (Ancient Greek philosopher), *Politics*

Political Science

A master science?

Throughout the history of western civilization there runs a great tradition of **political thought** with a pantheon of giant figures who have applied their minds to profound questions relating to politics (chapter 2). The subject is also the stuff of much great drama, literature and art. Aristotle described politics as the 'Master Science' and it is not difficult to see what he meant. All we do in our lives, in society, the sciences and arts, will be influenced by politics; it is through politics that the totality of social existence is orchestrated.

Every intellectual attitude is latently political.

Thomas Mann (1875–1955; German writer), quoted in the *Observer* (11 Aug. 1974)

Politics is not a science... but an art.

Otto von Bismarck (1815–98; Prusso-German statesman), speech, Reichstag (15 March 1884)

Political scientists do not wear white coats, peer through microscopes or fill up test tubes. Is **political science** really a science? Can it produce the systematic, ordered, predictive propositions associated with a subject such as physics? This is not a new question. The work of Aristotle, which involved him in a famous classification of the constitutions of the many Greek city-states, was just as systematic and ‘scientific’ as his work in the natural sciences. However, the advent of Galileo and Newton in physics led to developments that seemed to transport the physical sciences into new realms of precision, uniformity and prediction.

Yet some social scientists have tried to build a body of **political theory** – laws of society and politics resembling those of the physical sciences. Karl Marx (1818–83) was one of these (see chapter 2). Under the influence of *logical-positivism* (a school of philosophy holding that only statements capable of being disproved can be meaningful), the post-war era saw renewed efforts by political scientists to steer the discipline towards rigorous theoretical propositions by the use of careful techniques and methods of empirical observation. In this effort to ape the objective observational methods of the ‘hard’ sciences they sought to ally the discipline more closely with anthropology and psychology. This movement was termed **behaviouralism** and one of its results was a pre-occupation with the observable, or more particularly, the quantifiable. The problem with this was that many of the studies (from attitude surveys to voting statistics) were often tedious and sometimes essentially trite. They did not address the really big questions of politics, such as: What is power? Where does it really lie? Why do states go to war? Why do people die of starvation amidst abundance?

Others, including Max Weber, were sceptical of the idea that people and organizations could be studied in this way. Human beings reason and interpret the world, and the proposition that they are best treated as unthinking molecules in a test tube is dubious, if not ludicrous. He argued that the study of human affairs should take account of reason, motives and emotions in order to afford a deeper level of understanding, which he termed *verstehen*.

Today few would deny Weber’s argument. Ironically, as the hard sciences push further into the unknown they encounter less rather than more precision and are obliged to construct ‘uncertainty principles’, ‘fuzzy logic’ and ‘chaos theories’ reflecting the vagaries that have long confronted the social scientist. Yet behaviouralism has left a beneficial legacy in that political scientists can no longer allow their minds to dwell for too long in the stratosphere of abstraction and metaphysics, like medieval scholastics who disputed how many angels could balance on the point of a needle. Hence, the modern discipline of political science combines many approaches and includes a number of interrelated subdisciplines with various focuses and methodologies.

- ◆ *Political theory* examines theories of political institutions, including the law, the state, systems of representation, forms of government, and so on.

- ◆ *Political philosophy* searches for highly generalized answers to major questions such as the meaning of freedom, justice, equality and rights. Ultimately **political philosophy** addresses the biggest questions of all: what is the nature of the ‘good life’ and what must the state do to promote this?
- ◆ *Political ideology* is concerned with ideas about the way the state should be organized (see chapter 2).
- ◆ *Political economy* examines the state in the economic system. It leads us to the power of economic forces and the working of the global economy.
- ◆ *Political sociology* looks more towards the social world for an understanding of politics. It is concerned with how political attitudes are formed and how they are influenced by those with power. It also studies social stratification, including class formation and elites.
- ◆ *Political institutions* lead students to the formal machinery of the state, a key site of much political activity.
- ◆ *Policy studies* focus on the policy-making process of government and are centrally concerned with the analysis of power.
- ◆ *Comparative government* searches for generalizations about politics derived from widespread examination of groups of countries. Conceptually straightforward, it can be immensely daunting in practical terms.
- ◆ *International relations* studies the ways in which states relate to each other in war and in peace.

The interdisciplinary perspective

Not only does political science comprise the subdisciplines outlined above, it is itself multidisciplinary; magpie-like, it draws upon a wide range of other disciplines. The social sciences study one single, complex reality and the different disciplines are artificial territories staked out to facilitate microscopic study of particular aspects. However, this can hinder understanding if we adopt a blinkered view.

Hence, while this book is rooted in the territory of political science, it is open to other perspectives. It is, for example, an inescapable fact that many of the forces acting upon the political system are *economic* in origin, whether originating from the stock exchange or the plight of the homeless. To understand the British constitution we require a *legal* perspective, although this must be seasoned with an understanding of the balance of power, which breathes life into the formal constitution. The discipline of *sociology*, concerned with education, culture, class, racism and gender – all of which fuel much political activity – must also have a central place. Underlying all is the *historical* dimension. It is almost impossible to comprehend the present without understanding patterns of development. We do not take an historical perspective by way of neat chronological introduction; we do so because the politics of today is only an ephemeral bloom on the tree of the past.

There is also an important *geographical* dimension to politics. At home there are issues of territorial management and in the world there is a global economy populated by more and less developed countries as well as giant corporations, many of them richer than states. Beyond the world economy is a political order reflecting the balance of military power, political alliances and a global ecological system innocent of national boundaries, underscoring the interdependence of states in the modern world. Only by rejecting the narrow disciplinary approach can the study of politics aspire to the title the ‘master science’.

The governance perspective

The existence of inter-state groupings, particularly the development of the European Union (EU), has led some scholars to focus on the concept of multi-level **governance** (Smith 1997). In the case of the UK, bodies such as NATO, the World Bank and the EU imply a level of governance above the state. In addition there are transnational corporations, which are themselves virtual institutions of governance, and international non-government organizations (NGOs) pursuing social goals such as the relief of child poverty, peace or environmental protection.

Below the Westminster government there are new provincial assemblies, regional institutions (and pressure for elected regional assemblies) in England, a complex structure of elected and non-elected local authorities, composed of yet more tiers, public–private partnerships and a network of private organizations and groups with varying degrees of power over the lives of citizens. Hence, it no longer makes sense (if it ever did) to study state governments in isolation as if they are in complete command of their destinies.

Chapter 4 introduces the complex nature of the globalized world of governance and further chapters variously anatomize the EU itself, the new territorial politics resulting from devolution and regionalism, the world of quangos and private–public partnerships, pressure group politics and the multi-tiered system of local government. All these are linked in the complex network of governance.

In this world, state boundaries become blurred and hierarchical relationships slacken or disappear entirely, to be replaced by more subtle processes of negotiation, bargaining, exchange and compromise. Thus the EU does not necessarily command state governments and state governments do not necessarily command local governments. Regional and local authorities, or even private companies, can bypass nation-states to treat directly with international bodies.

Governance, as used in this context, becomes more than a synonym for the act of governing (Pierre and Stoker 2000). It aims to characterize the processes of contemporary politics in a more realistic way. Approaches taking the formal institutions of government as the fount of all power (examining what is sometimes termed the ‘Westminster model’) appear outmoded and misleading.

Peering behind the facade

The political scientist must be attentive to the real world before all else and, like Machiavelli, seek to peel away the facade in search of a deeper reality for, as observed above, much in politics is about deception. Writers in the orthodox liberal-democratic tradition betray a tendency to describe what they see as a beautiful stately home. Like overawed paying visitors, they are content to admire the ornate outer facade and the fine draperies and furniture inside but remain too timid to push beyond the red ropes into the living quarters. A central concern of this book is to encourage the habit of enquiry, of looking beneath the surface or, where we are not permitted (and we are talking about one of the most secretive systems in the world), to remain conscious of the limitations of conventional pictures and to be open to those theories about what *might* be there.

Orthodox writing on British politics purports to take an objective position, without a commitment to any political ideology. The cogs and cams of the system are detailed in much the same way as the internal combustion engine might be. The implication of this approach is that the state itself is an apolitical machine, not favouring any particular interest within society, which a government takes over like the driver of a car. This belief is a central plank in the theory of British liberal democracy. However, the idea of the neutral state, easily controlled by anyone in the driving seat, may be contested. To Marxists and others it serves the interests of capital and wealth. Hence, writers implying it to be impartial are actually making a political (anti-left) statement. Rather than peeling away the facade they are contributing to the process of concealment.

Key points

- A common definition of politics is the resolution by compromise and conciliation of the inevitable conflicts in any community.
- Politics necessarily entails the concept of authority, an accepted or legitimate form of power.
- It is possible to speak of politics in the context of any organization but political scientists mainly study the state.
- The state is a community with a territory within which it enjoys legal sovereignty.
- The government of the day may be in control of the state, but is conceptually distinct from it.
- The decisions made through politics can be made by other means but the idea that politics can be removed from life is an illusion.
- The study of politics should be concerned with looking behind the formal facade of government to understand where power lies; to understand who gets what, when and how.

Review your understanding of the following terms and concepts

aristocracy	<i>Gemeinschaft</i>	oligarchy
art of the possible	<i>Gesellschaft</i>	<i>polis</i>
authoritative allocation of values	governance	political philosophy
authority	government	political science
behaviouralism	legitimacy	polity
citizen	legitimation	power
city-state	machinery of government	rational decision-making
civil society	market	society
democracy	mob rule	state
<i>demos</i>	monarchy	state violence
	nation-state	tyranny

Questions for discussion

- 1 What is politics?
- 2 'Politics is the art of the possible.' Discuss.
- 3 Distinguish between power and authority.
- 4 Distinguish between the concepts of 'state' and 'society'.
- 5 'Violence is the abrogation of politics.' Discuss.
- 6 'Power tends to corrupt, great men are almost always bad men.' Discuss.
- 7 'Education should be taken out of politics.' Why do people say this? How realistic is their suggestion?
- 8 'Politics is the means whereby the powerful get what they want.' Discuss.
- 9 To what extent can the study of politics be described as a science?
- 10 Can the study of politics validly claim to be the 'master science'?

Topic for debate

This house believes with Camus that 'men who have greatness within them don't go in for politics'.

Further reading

Cornford, F. M. (ed. and translator) (1941) *The Republic of Plato*.

Accessible edition of the great masterwork, raising many of the questions and conundrums of the study of politics today.

Crick, B. (2000) *In Defence of Politics*, (5th edn).

Classic essay on the idea of politics as a peaceful and highly desirable process of conciliation.

Duverger, M. (1966) *The Idea of Politics*.

Classic text by French scholar. Analyses political conflict from its roots in primitive societies to modern times.

Heywood, A. (1994) *Political Ideas and Concepts*.

Perceptive and thought-provoking.

Lasswell, H. (1936) *Politics: Who Gets What, When, How?*

Seminal statement of the power view of politics.

Leftwich, A. (1984) *What is Politics? The Activity and its Study*.

Accessible introduction.

Mackenzie, W. J. M. (1969) *Politics and Social Science*.

Breathtaking 'Cook's Tour' of a wide range of approaches to the study of politics.

Miller, J. B. D. (1962) *The Nature of Politics*.

Stresses the ubiquity of politics; it will always be found in some form or other.

Wallas, G. (1948) *Human Nature in Politics*.

Criticizes the idea that people act rationally in politics.

For light relief

Jean Anouilh, *Antigone*.

Highlights conflicts between personal morality and the hypocrisy of a corrupt society, the main character preferring death to compromise.

Anthony Arblaster, *Viva la Libertà! Politics in Opera*.

Uncovers the political dimension and the ideals of freedom in a vast range of operas, from 'The Marriage of Figaro' to 'Nixon in China'.

Bertolt Brecht, *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*.

Who owns what? What is the moral authority for ownership? Brecht's play makes brilliant use of analogy to explore these questions.

Jermy Paxman, *A Political Animal*.

Does power corrupt? A forensic examination of people in power in Britain by one of their scourges.

William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*.

Intrigue of politics and the corrupting effects of high-vaulting ambition.

L. Niel Smith, *The Venus Belt*.

A sci-fi story about two parallel universes, one with and one without a government.

Anthony Trollope, *The Pallisers*.

The world of the nineteenth-century political establishment, with its intrigue, romance and arrogant power.

