

WHAT IS POLITICS?

Andrew Heywood

In the early stages of academic study students are invariably encouraged to reflect on what the subject itself is about, usually by being asked questions such as 'What is History?', 'What is Economics?' or 'What is Astrophysics?'. Such reflections have the virtue of letting students know what they are in for: what they are about to study and what issues or topics are going to be raised. Unfortunately for students of politics, however, the question 'What is Politics?' is more likely to generate confusion rather than bring comfort and reassurance. The problem is that debate, argument and disagreement lie at the very heart of politics, and the definition of 'the political' is no exception¹.

Defining Politics

Politics, in its broadest sense, is the activity through which people make, preserve and amend the general rules under which they live. As such, politics is inextricably linked to the phenomena of conflict and cooperation. On the one hand, the existence of rival opinions, different wants, competing needs or opposing interests guarantees disagreement about the rules under which people live. On the other hand, people recognise that in order to influence these rules or ensure that they are upheld, they must work with others. This is why the heart of the 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, since not all conflicts are - or can be - resolved.

Nevertheless, when examined more closely, this broad definition of politics raises as many questions as it answers. 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)? There are, in other words, a number of more specific definitions of politics; indeed, it sometimes appears that there are as many definitions as there are authorities willing to offer an opinion on the subject. The main definitions nevertheless can be broken down into four categories: politics as the art of government; politics as public affairs; politics as compromise; and politics as power .

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, having developed from the original meaning of the term in Ancient Greece.

The word 'politics' is derived from *polis*, literally meaning 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 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'. 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 which academic political science has helped to perpetuate.

In many ways the notion that politics amounts to 'what concerns the state' is the traditional view of the discipline, reflected in the tendency for academic study to focus upon the personnel and machinery of government. To study politics is in essence to study government, or more broadly, to study the exercise of authority. David Easton thus defined politics as the 'authoritative allocation of values'². By this he meant that politics encompasses the various processes through which government responds to pressures from the larger society, in particular by allocating benefits, rewards or penalties. 'Authoritative values' are therefore ones that are widely accepted in society and considered binding by the mass of citizens. In this view, politics is associated with 'policy', with formal or authoritative decisions that establish a plan of action for the community.

However, this definition offers a highly restricted view of politics. Politics is what takes place within a 'polity', a system of social organisation centred upon the machinery of government. Politics can therefore be found 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 are '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'.

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 organisation like a political party. This is the sense in which politicians are described as 'political' whereas civil servants are seen as 'non-political', so 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 may be accused of being 'political' if their judgement is influenced by personal preferences or some other form of bias.

Politics as public affairs

The second 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'³, by which he meant that it is only within a political community that human beings can live 'the good life'. Politics is, then, 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 society security system and so forth - can be regarded as 'public' in the sense that they are responsible for the collective organisation of community life. Moreover, they are funded at the public's expense, out of taxation. By contrast, civil society consists of institutions like 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 which are properly exercised by public bodies. Those areas of life in which

individuals can and do manage for themselves - economic, social, domestic, personal, cultural, artistic and so on - are therefore clearly 'non-political'.

An alternative 'public/private' divide is sometimes expressed in a further and more subtle distinction, namely between 'the political' and 'the personal'. 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 and to which the public has access. It is therefore possible to argue that politics takes place in workplace. Nevertheless, although this view regards institutions like businesses, community groups, clubs and trade unions as 'public', it remains a restricted view of politics. According to this perspective, politics does not, and should not, infringe upon 'personal' affairs and institutions. Feminist thinkers in particular have pointed out that this implies that politics effectively stops at the front door; it does not take place in the family, in domestic life or in personal relationships. Politicians, for example, tend to classify their own sexual behaviour or financial affairs as 'personal' matters, thereby denying that they have political significance in the sense that they do not touch on their conduct of public affairs.

Politics as compromise and consensus

The third conception of politics refers not so much to the arena within which politics is conducted as to the way in which decisions are made. Specifically, politics is seen as a particular means of resolving conflict, namely by compromise, conciliation and negotiation, rather than through a resort to force and naked power. This is what is implied when politics is portrayed as 'the art of the possible'. Such a definition is evident in the everyday use of the term. For instance, a 'political' solution to a problem implies peaceful debate and arbitration, by contrast with what is often called a 'military' solution. Bernard Crick, a leading proponent of this view, defined politics as follows:

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 community⁴.

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'⁵. Such a view of politics reflects a resolute faith in the efficacy of debate and discussion, as well as the belief that society is characterised by consensus rather than by irreconcilable conflict. In other words, the disagreements that exist *can* be resolved without a 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.

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 sees politics at work in all social activities and in every corner of human existence. As Adrian Leftwich put it: 'Politics is at the heart of *all* collective social activity, formal and informal, public and private, in *all* human groups, institutions and societies'⁶. 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 within nations and on the global stage. However, what is it that is distinctive about political activity? What marks off politics from any other form of social behaviour?

At its broadest, politics concerns the production, distribution and use of resources in the course of social existence. Politics, in essence, is 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?*⁷. True, politics is about diversity and conflict, but this is enriched by the existence of scarcity, by the simple fact that while human needs and desires are infinite, the resources available to satisfy them are always limited. Politics is therefore a struggle over scarce resources, and power is the means through which this struggle is conducted.

Advocates of this view of power include feminists and Marxists. Modern feminists have shown particular interest in the idea of 'the political'. This arises from the fact that conventional definitions of politics effectively exclude women from political life. Women have traditionally been confined to a 'private' sphere of existence, centred on the family and domestic responsibilities. Radical feminists have therefore attacked the 'public/private' divide, proclaiming instead that 'the personal is the political'. This slogan neatly encapsulates the radical feminist belief that what goes on in domestic, family and personal life is intensely political, indeed it is the basis of all other political struggles. Clearly, a more radical notion of politics underlies this position. This was summed up by Kate Millett as, 'power-structured relationships, arrangements whereby one group of persons is controlled by another'⁸. Feminists are therefore concerned with 'the politics of everyday life'. In their view, relationships within the family, between husbands and wives, or between parents and children, are every bit as political as relationships between employers and workers, or between government and citizens.

Marxists have used the term politics in two senses. On one level, Marx used 'politics' in a conventional sense to refer to the apparatus of the state. In the *Communist Manifesto* he thus referred to political power as 'merely the organised power of one class for oppressing another'⁹.

For Marx, politics, together with law and culture, are part of a 'superstructure', distinct from the economic 'base', which is the real foundation of social life. However, he did not see the economic 'base' and the legal and the political 'superstructure' as entirely separate, but believed that the 'superstructure' arose out of, and reflected, the economic 'base'. At a deeper level, political power is therefore rooted in the class system; as V. I. Lenin put it: 'Politics is the most concentrated form of economics'. Far from 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, characterised as Marxists believe it to be by class struggle, is the very heart of politics.

References

- ¹ For a broader discussion of politics, government and the state see Heywood, A. *Political Theory: An Introduction*. London: Palgrave, Ch. 3.
- ² Easton, D. (1981) *The Political System*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- ³ Aristotle (1948) *Politics*, ed. E. Baker. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- ⁴ Crick, B. (1993) *In Defence of Politics*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 21.
- ⁵ Crick, B. *ibid* ., 30.
- ⁶ Leftwich, A. *What is Politics?: The Activity and its Study*. Oxford: Blackwell, 64.
- ⁷ Lasswell, H. (1936) *Politics: Who Get What, When, How?* New York: McGraw-Hill.
- ⁸ Millett, K. (1970) *Sexual Politics*. London: Granada, 23.
- ⁹ Marx, K and Engels, F. (1970) *Communist Manifesto*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 105.