

Politics, Political Science, Political Thought, Theory: An Orientation¹

Origin:

The term 'politics' originates from the Greek word *polis*, which literally means the city state. Politics was considered as the affairs of the *polis* or broadly speaking, 'what concerns the *polis*'. Aristotle used the term politics to suggest both, the activities of the city states as well as the systematic study of it.

Politics is a dynamic multidimensional theme having conceptual as well as applied aspects. It is as old as the human community itself. But the systematic study of politics is no older than **Kautilya's** (350-275 BC) *Arthashastra* or **Aristotle's** (384–322BC) *Politics*. The study of politics as a separate branch of knowledge has been initiated much later. The advent of Political Science as a university discipline is evidenced by the naming of university departments and chairs with the title of Political Science since the 1860s. In 1890 the term 'Political Science' was included to the American University Catalogue for the first time.

Bluntschli in his book *Theory of State* described 'politics' as an art and 'political science' as the study of politics.

Defining Politics:

Because of the dynamic and complex nature of politics, it has been defined in innumerable, sometimes conflicting, ways by the experts in the field. The following definitions of politics are a proof of that.

- **R.N. Berki:** "The experience of politics refers to activities concerned with the change and maintenance of the character and existence of human associations called states."
- **V.V. Dyke:** "Politics is a struggle among actors pursuing conflicting desires on public issues."
- **David Easton:** "... politics is the authoritative allocation of values for a society."
- **A. Leftwich:** "Politics comprises all the activities of co-operation and conflict, within and between societies, whereby the human species goes about organizing the use, production and distribution of human, natural and other resources in the course of the production and reproduction of its biological and social life."

Defining Political Science:

The nature and scope of Political Science is also a matter of great debate. It has been defined by scholars from different angles. For example:

- **Bluntschli:** Political Science is the "Science of the State."
- **Garner:** "Political Science begins and ends with the State."
- **Gettel:** "Political Science is a historical investigation of what the state has been, an analytical study of what the state is and a politico-ethical discussion of what the state should be."
- **Paul Gilchrist:** "Political Science deals with the State and Government."

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- **Harold J. Laski:** “Political Science concerns itself with the life of men in relation to organized states.”
- **Paul Janet:** “Political Science is that part of Social Science which treats of the foundations of the state and the principles of the government.”
- **David Easton:** “Political Science is the study of the authoritative allocation of values influenced by the use and distribution of power.”
- **Robert Dahl:** “Political analysis deals with the power, rule or authority.”
- **Harold Lasswell:** “Political Science as an empirical discipline is concerned with the study of the shaping and the sharing of power and it refers to political acts performed in power perspectives.”

Politics & Political Science:

The relation between Politics and Political Science has been a major concern of the Political Scientists for many years.

Gerry Stoker explains the relation between politics and political science this way:

“As a process of conflict and co-operation over the resources necessary to the production and reproduction of our lives, politics is a ubiquitous activity. Yet the discipline of politics should give special consideration to how that process is resolved in the act of government – in particular how issues reach and leave the governmental agenda and how, within that arena, issues are discussed, contested and decided.... Political Science is an academic discipline which seeks systematically to describe, analyse and explain collective decision-making and the values and perspectives that underlie it.

“However Political Science should pay particular attention to the collective arena constituted by the operation of government in the modern state because of the particular form of extensive and compulsory authority embodied within its activities. It should also recognize that if ‘normal’ politics breaks down, political activity can take a variety of more violent and brutal forms.”

(*Theory and Methods in Political Science* edited by Gerry Stoker and David Marsh, 1995)

According to **Robert E. Goodin** and **Hans-Dieter Klingemann** politics is “...the constrained use of social power” and Political Science is “...the study of the nature and source of those constraints and the techniques for the use of social power within those constraints.”

(*Political Science: the Discipline* by Robert E. Goodin and Hans-Dieter Klingemann in *A New Handbook of Political Science*, 1998)

Political Science as a *science*:

There is also a debate over the nature Political Science as a *science*. It is said to be a *science* in the sense that it is a branch of study or a discipline, not in terms of the physical sciences. The *Concise Oxford English Dictionary* defines the term ‘Discipline’ as ‘a branch of instructions; mental and moral training; drill; system of rules for conduct’.

W.J.M. Mackenzie: “So far as I can judge, ‘political science’ is still the name which carries meaning to the general public.... The word science here indicates simply that there exists an academic tradition of the study of politics, a discipline communicated from teacher to pupil, by speech and writing, for some 2,500 years now.

It does not mean that this discipline claims to be a ‘natural science’, or that it could be improved by copying the methods of physics and chemistry more exactly.” He also states that, Political Science offers ‘original knowledge’ (i.e. logical coherence) and demands of its participants certain intellectual disciplines (e.g. its knowledge or hypothesis is public and subject to challenge, the evidences must support the proposition, etc.) in debate.

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

According to **Zuckerman** Political Science is a ‘science’ in the sense when ‘science’ refers to the following features: “Emotional attachments, personal hunches and intuitive understanding do not adequately justify knowledge claims.... Logical coherence and adequate evidence are the most widely accepted criteria by which we judge claims to knowledge.”

Kenneth Minogue says: “The scientific study of politics is ...a great but limited achievement of our century (i.e. the 20th Century). Like any other form of understanding, it gains its power from its limitations, but it happens that the specific limitations of science in its fullest sense are especially restrictive in the understanding of human life. But political science often escapes this limitation by ignoring the strict requirements of science as a discipline. Much of its material is historical and descriptive, as indeed it must be if we are to recognize that any understanding of the government of modern states cannot be separated from the culture of the people who live in them.”

(*Politics: A Very Short Introduction* by Kenneth Minogue, 1995)

Political Thought, Political Theory & Political Ideology:

In *A History of Political Thought: from Plato to Marx* **S. Mukherjee** and **S. Ramaswamy** explained:

“*Political thought* is the thought of the whole community. This includes the writings and speeches of the articulate sections, like professional politicians, political commentators, social reformers and ordinary persons of a community. Thought can be in the form of political treatises, scholarly articles, speeches, government policies and decisions, and poems and prose that express the anguish of people. Thought is time bound. In short, political thought includes theories that attempt to explain political behaviour, values to evaluate it and methods to control it....”

For example the political thought of the Ancient Greece as reflected in the writings of Plato and Aristotle, the Roman political thought as reflected in the writings of Cicero and Polibious, the political thought of the Middle Ages as reflected in the writings of St. Augustine, St. Thomas Aquinas and Marsilio of Padua, the political thought of the Renaissance reflected through the ideas of Machiavelli, or the political thought of eighteenth century America as reflected in the American Declaration of Independence (1776).

“*Political theory*, unlike *thought* refers to the speculation by a single individual usually articulated in treatise(s) as models of explanation. It consists of the theories of institutions, including those of the state, of law, of representation and of election. The mode of explanation is comparative and explanatory....”

For example Austin’s Monistic theory, the Social Contract theory of Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau, the theory of Class and Class Struggle of Marx, Engels and Lenin, the Systems Analysis of David Easton or the theory of Justice of John Rawls.

“*Political ideology* is a systematic and all-embracing doctrine which attempts to give a complete and universally applicable theory of human nature and society, with a detail programme of attaining it.”

For example Idealism, Liberalism, Conservatism, Socialism, Anarchism, Fascism and Feminism etc.

(*A History of Political Thought: from Plato to Marx* by S. Mukherjee and S. Ramaswamy, 2009)

According to **Gerry Stoker**, “The fundamental purpose of theory is ... to explain, comprehend and interpret reality.... Theoretical statements enable the identification of common grounds as well as divergence and discrepancy between contrasting patterns of ideas.”

The major functions of political theory include:

1. It ‘foregrounds’ certain aspects of the world and guides the investigator to focus on particular aspects of reality.
2. It acts as a useful ‘filing system’, a framework within which to place observations of reality.
3. It enables patterns of ideas to develop.
4. It facilitates debate, exchange and learning within Political Science.

Approaches to the Study of Political Ideas:

There are two distinct approaches to study political ideas. One is the sociological approach. Explaining which **Amal Kumar Mukhopadhyay** wrote, “...ideas have to be studied in the context of relevant historical conditions ... ideas ... are, indeed, the product of their time and people.” This approach is rooted in the theoretical framework presented by **Karl Marx** and **Frederick Engels** in their *The German Ideology*, which holds: “the ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas: i.e., the class, which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force.... The individuals comprising the ruling class possess among other things consciousness, and therefore think. In so far, therefore, as they rule as a class and determine the extent and compass of an epoch, it is self-evident that they do this in their whole range, hence among other things rule also as thinkers, as producers of ideas, and regulate the production and distribution of the ideas of their age: thus their ideas are the ruling ideas of the epoch.” So, according to Amal Kumar Mukhopadhyay, one of the main objectives of this approach is to find out “the connection of the ruling ideas of each age with the needs of its ruling class.”

(*Western Political Thought: from Plato to Marx* by Amal Kumar Mukhopadhyay, 1988)

On the other hand the philosophical approach seeks to analyze the content of the political ideas of great thinkers without much reference to their respective socio-economic background. According to **S. Mukherjee** and **S. Ramaswamy** this approach “contended that belief structures have a social origin, and the social science knowledge is dependent on the class origin of a theorist....” Emphasizing this **D. Germino** in his *Beyond Ideology: The Revival of Political Theory* said: “While the data offered by the “sociology of knowledge” are of obvious relevance in explaining the thinking of some propagandists for mass movements they are of scant significance in helping us understand a Plato or Hegel.” **F.C. White** observed that while biographical references of a thinker are “important to the historian and the sociologist, is of little significance to the student of political philosophy. The interest of the latter ... lies not in accounting for the origin and shaping of political ideas, but in analyzing them and in assessing their worth.”

(‘Plato and the Good of the Whole’ by F.C. White in *Political Thinkers* edited by David Muschamp, 1989)

For the beginner choosing a midway between these two extreme positions may be useful for a balanced understanding of the political ideas.