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POLITICS AND SOCIETY

*An Introduction to Political Sociology*

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by

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*Chapter 1*

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WHAT IS POLITICAL  
SOCIOLOGY?

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SOCIOLOGY AND POLITICAL SCIENCE

Sociology is the study of human behaviour within a societal context. A society is therefore the basic unit of analysis, in that sociology differs from psychology, whose basic unit of analysis is the human being. A society may be defined as a distinctive and coherent grouping of human beings living within some degree of proximity, whose behaviour is characterised by various common practices, norms, and beliefs that distinguish it from other human groupings with clearly different practices, norms, and beliefs.

The term 'sociology' was coined by Auguste Comte (1798–1857), one of the founding fathers of the discipline. Both Comte and Herbert Spencer (1820–1903), another of the founding fathers, stressed that society was the basic unit of sociological analysis. Nominating the founding fathers of one of the more recently established academic disciplines might seem a fairly simple business, but it is always a matter of opinion and some observers might wish to add – even substitute – one or more of the names of Karl Marx (1818–83), Emile Durkheim (1858–1917), or Max Weber (1864–1920). Founding fathers or not, however, all three made massive contributions to sociology, both theoretically and empirically. Marx was a polymath – historian, political philosopher, and economist, and, of course, actively involved in politics. His exploration of and theories concerning the relationship between politics, economics and society, to which he involuntarily gave his name, are an eloquent testimony to

his contribution to sociology. Durkheim's development of the division of labour or the specialisation of roles in society was of great importance and his studies of religion and of suicide were models of sociological investigation, especially in the use of statistics. Weber was both a critic of Marx and the progenitor of a remarkable range of concepts concerning the state, power, authority, and legitimacy, and of the role of ideas or value-systems in the development of and changes in society. In the cases of Marx and Weber, however, significant as their contributions were to the development of sociology, an even better case can be made for calling them the founding fathers of political sociology, but that is to anticipate later discussion.

By definition, sociology could be said to encompass political science. After all, politics takes place within a societal context, but as an academic discipline it developed almost entirely separately from sociology. The study of politics, particularly in Europe, grew out of legal studies, especially, and not surprisingly, constitutional law. In Britain, and to a lesser extent the United States, it developed mainly from the study of history. Both, of course, were perfectly logical developments, but they led to a situation in which the study of politics had little in common with sociology. Moreover, whatever disputes may have arisen over the rights of disciplines such as sociology, psychology and economics to claim to be social *sciences*, there was little dispute over their subject matter. Not only has political science been more frequently accused of being a pseudo-science, but its subject matter has always been in greater dispute.

Definitions of politics are legion and no one definition has been universally accepted. In order to solve this definitional problem it has frequently been circumvented by trying to delineate the essence or central concept of political study. Politics, it is argued, is the resolution of human conflict; it is the process by which society authoritatively allocates resources and values; it is the process by which society makes decisions or evolves policies; it is the exercise of power and influence in society. In practice, this merely shifts the definitional problem. None the less, each of these concepts focuses on a particular question: how, within a society, do human beings solve their problems with their fellow human beings and with their environment? Viewed this way political science is concerned with the study of the problems themselves, of the means that may be evolved to deal with them, of the factors that influence individuals

and groups of individuals in seeking their solution, and, by no means least, with the ideas and values which influence human beings in dealing with those problems. Bernard Crick (1966, p. 683) argues that 'political science is a subject-matter, not an autonomous discipline . . . The subject-matter is defined by a problem', and that problem is the role of government, which he defines as 'the activity of maintaining order'. The reference to order is meant in the sense of the regulation of relations between individuals and groups of individuals, not merely in the narrow sense of the phrase 'law and order'. Political science is therefore the study of the function of government in society.

Although political scientists like Crick and sociologists like Gary Runciman (1965) see an essential unity of the social sciences, academically they have largely developed separately. The study of politics in particular exhibited a strong tendency to concentrate on the study of political institutions, such as executives and legislatures, political parties and bureaucracies, and of central and local administration, only later venturing into the study of areas such as the electoral, legislative, policy-making, and organisational and administrative processes. Political scientists were also slow to develop an interest in other areas now regarded as crucial to an understanding of politics. For example, although A. F. Bentley published a pioneering book on pressure or interest groups in 1908, it was not until the 1950s that political scientists paid significant attention to pressure politics. However, it was two other related developments that gave rise to the growth of modern political sociology.

The first of these was the development in the social sciences of the behavioural approach to the study of social phenomena. Behaviouralism developed initially and most strongly in the United States and grew out of what were known as behaviourist studies in psychology. As the term 'behaviourist' implies, these studies concentrated on observing and analysing individual and group behaviour, often using animals in laboratory experiments. There was a strong emphasis on systematic and precise measurement and on seeking to establish the existence of behavioural patterns which could form the basis for hypothesising laws of behaviour. Other social scientists, especially in sociology and later in political science, began to use similar methods, stressing the importance of intellectual rigour, precise measurement, the development of empirically based generalisations, and objectivity (see Eulau 1963, 1969).

The second and subsequent development was a particular concern among American political scientists about the problem of studying the politics of the Third World or developing countries – those parts of the world in Africa, Asia, and Latin America that, in most cases, had been subject to colonial rule or, like China, to extensive Western influence. Earlier comparative studies had tended to follow the traditional pattern of institutional analysis, with relatively little consideration of the socio-cultural milieu in which those institutions operated and the differences that this might make. The criticisms of the traditional approach were sometimes exaggerated, but were far from unfounded.

These two developments brought many political scientists much closer to their colleagues in other social sciences, especially sociology. In particular, a number of political scientists were attracted by the development of systems theory, notably though not exclusively through the ideas of Talcott Parsons, whose book *The Social System* (1951) had a considerable impact beyond the realm of sociology. Parsons argued that all societies constituted a social system, within which operated a number of subsystems. In addition, he argued a social system was self-regulating or self-adjusting, adapting itself as circumstances changed. Its normal state was one of equilibrium and, in response to demands made upon it, the social system adjusted itself in order to restore a state of equilibrium. The latter state was normally attained and maintained by the adequate and necessary performance of a number of functions, each performed by a different part of the system. Thus the pattern-maintenance function (i.e. managing tension within the system) is performed by its cultural subsystem, the adaptation or distributive function by the economic subsystem, the integration function (i.e. co-ordinating interrelationships between members of the system) by the legal and regulatory subsystem, and the goal-attainment function (i.e. mobilising people and resources to achieve collective ends) by the political subsystem. Parsons' theory of the social system is also known as structural functionalism, since the functions necessary for the survival of the system are performed by the structures or patterns of behaviour which constitute each subsystem.

The application of systems theory in political science was not exclusively Parsonian and one of the leading political scientists in the systems field, David Easton (1953, 1965a, 1965b), did not develop his ideas about the political system in structural-functional terms.

However, Easton placed great stress upon the relationship between the political system and its environment, developing what he called input-output analysis. In Easton's scheme of things the environment produced inputs into the political system in the form of demands – desired political decisions on particular policy matters, and supports – attitudes and actions by individuals and groups of individuals which sustained the political system. The latter processed these inputs, producing outputs in the form of decisions and actions, which, operating through a feedback loop, produced more demands and supports.

Subsequently, Gabriel Almond adapted Easton's input-output analysis to structural functionalism, describing certain functions as inputs and others as outputs. Almond's purpose was to provide a basis for comparative political analysis, particularly of developing countries. In collaboration with James S. Coleman and a number of other political scientists, Almond produced *The Politics of Developing Areas* (1960) and later, with G. Bingham Powell, *Comparative Politics: A developmental approach* (1966). Meanwhile, Almond and another political scientist, Sidney Verba, wrote another influential book, *The Civic Culture* (1963), which, based upon a detailed five-nation survey, developed the concept of political culture – the ideas and attitudes that underpin a given political system.

Systems theory, structural functionalism, and concepts such as political culture were not accepted universally, but the work of Easton, Almond and others was part of and also itself stimulated much research into comparative politics in general and Third World politics in particular. Systems theory was criticised as lacking empirical support, difficult to apply in the conduct of research, and as being theoretically unable to give an adequate explanation of major or fundamental changes in societies. Structural functionalism was similarly criticised, particularly in respect of accounting for societal change and for its inadequate conceptualisation of its key terms, 'structure' and 'function'. These criticisms applied equally to the developmental approach, but Almond's conceptual scheme of types of political systems within a developmental framework was also seen as value-laden and ethnocentric by appearing to fit best and imply development towards the American political system.

It would be misleading, however, to attribute the development of modern political sociology to Easton and Almond and their colleagues, and even more so to describe them as the founding fathers

of political sociology. The latter's roots not only significantly predate this work, but are far more disparate.

### THE ORIGINS AND DEVELOPMENT OF POLITICAL SOCIOLOGY

All disciplines or subjects produce their subdisciplines or more specialised areas of study and research, but political sociology, while not unique in this respect, seeks to straddle two important social sciences. Essentially political sociology seeks to examine the links between politics and society, to place politics within its societal context by analysing the relationship between social structures and political structures and between social behaviour and political behaviour. It is what Giovanni Sartori (1969, p. 19) has called 'an inter-disciplinary hybrid'. As such it draws heavily upon both disciplines it seeks to inform, but given their respective histories, it is perhaps appropriate that the two men who have the strongest claims to be the founding fathers of political sociology were more closely associated with sociology than with political science. These are, of course, Karl Marx and Max Weber, both of whom regarded politics as inextricably embedded in society.

Marx's contribution was massive and varied and falls into three areas: general theory, specific theory, and methodology. Following Hegel, Marx developed a theory of historical inevitability, but unlike Hegel he based his theory on the material conflict of opposing economic forces arising out of the means of production, resulting in the ultimate overthrow of capitalism and the creation of a classless society. Basically, Marx argued that the nature of any society depended upon the predominant mode of production, which determined the relationship between individuals and groups of individuals and the ideas and values predominant in that society. It therefore followed that fundamental change in society was consequent upon major changes in the mode of production. Marx's interpretation of history was based on the twin pillars of economic and sociological theory. He developed David Hume's labour-value theory into theories of surplus value and the exploitation of labour, and these formed the basis of his major sociological theory, the class struggle. He also developed a theory of alienation, which argued that the subordinate class or classes in society come to reject the ideas and values of the

ruling class and develop alternative and eventually revolutionary ideas and values, which formed the basis of the class struggle. This had to be preceded, however, by the development of class consciousness - another of Marx's important concepts, the realisation by subordinate classes of their true position in the means of production and therefore in society.

Many criticisms have been levelled at Marx's theories, some based on their general validity, others on their predictive value. For example, although he did not ignore the importance of ideas as sociological factors, Marx regarded them as dependent rather than independent variables, thus subordinating them to his economic interpretation of history. The role of Marxism as an ideology in many parts of the world would suggest that Marx over-emphasised the economic subordination of ideas. Similarly, the failure of a number of his predictions and his failure to anticipate the adaptive capacity of capitalism, have cast doubt on the validity of his theories. These criticisms do little, however, to diminish his contribution to political sociology. Indeed, Marx's theories have shown themselves to be extremely adaptable, and later Marxists and neo-Marxists have interpreted and reinterpreted them in the light of subsequent research and events. Both his general and his specific theories have stimulated an enormous amount of work, some of it seeking to support Marx's ideas, some to refute them. The result has been a vast contribution to knowledge, which in turn has often stimulated yet further research.

Quite apart from this, however, Marx made a further vital contribution in the field of methodology. His development of 'scientific socialism' laid down standards of scholarship and methods which were an example to subsequent social scientists. Marx endeavoured to give his theories a firm basis in fact by amassing a vast amount of evidence which he sought to examine in a systematic and rigorous fashion. How successful he was remains a matter of dispute, but the very fact that he claimed this for his theories meant that both his followers and critics had to make similar endeavours (see McLellan 1970, 1974, 1979, 1983; Giddens 1971; Bottomore 1979; Bottomore *et al.* 1983).

Perhaps inevitably, the second founding father of political sociology, Max Weber, was one of Marx's leading critics. Weber's contribution consisted not only of a major critique of Marx, but of a considerable number of specific studies and concepts of importance

to political sociology. In his work *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1930 [1904–5])\*, and in his studies of India, China and the Jewish people, Weber sought to demonstrate that non-economic factors, especially ideas, were important sociological factors. Moreover, in examining social stratification in various societies he argued that social strata could be based not only on an individual's 'class' or economic position in society, as Marx asserted, but also upon status or social position in society, or upon an individual's position in the societal power structure. These could, Weber acknowledged, be overlapping, but were not necessarily identical.

Weber also contributed several important conceptual and methodological ideas to political sociology: he focused attention on the importance of power as a political concept, particularly within the context of the state, and on the authoritative exercise of power or legitimacy. In the latter case he suggested three major bases for legitimacy – the traditional, the charismatic, and the legal-rational, which are the most famous of his 'ideal types'. Weber's concept of the ideal type is simply the construction of historically observable facts into a model or bench-mark against which other similar phenomena can be measured. The term 'ideal' is not meant as a judgement, but rather as a means of plotting points on a sociological graph, and the ideal type remains a useful tool in sociology generally.

Weber's other methodological legacy was the concept of sympathetic (or subjective) understanding or *Verstehen*, as applied to sociology. Weber felt that human behaviour could be better understood if account were taken of the motives and intentions of those directly involved in that behaviour. It was natural that Weber should stress such a concept, given the importance he attributed to the force of ideas as sociological factors. He acknowledged that the choice of subjects for investigation inevitably reflected the values of the researcher, but that once chosen it was possible, through the application of *Verstehen*, to be objective. None the less, there has been criticism of Weber's work on the grounds that, regardless of his claims that it was value-free, the examination of human motives involved an interpretative element which could not be ultimately objective. His work has also been criticised on other grounds, such as historical accuracy, but his work and ideas, like those of Marx, have proved

\* Dates within square brackets denote original date of publication.

a stimulus to subsequent generations of sociologists and political scientists (see Weber 1947, 1948, 1949; Giddens 1971).

Marx and Weber laid the foundations of political sociology, but a considerable period was to elapse before anything remotely resembling a complete edifice was to rise on those foundations. What did occur was the development of work on particular aspects of what are now regarded as integral parts of political sociology, such as the development of elite theories by Gaetano Mosca (1858–1941) and Vilfredo Pareto (1848–1923) and related studies of political parties by M. Ostrogorski (1854–1919) and Robert Michels (1876–1936). Subsequently, others, such as Stuart Rice in *Quantitative Methods in Politics* (1928), Paul Lazarsfeld *et al.* in *The People's Choice* (1944), and Rudolf Herbele, *From Democracy to Nazism* (1945), analysed electoral behaviour. Meanwhile, a small number of political scientists, notably Harold Lasswell in *Psychopathology and Politics* (1930) and *Politics: Who gets what, when, how* (1936), turned their attention to the role of personality in politics and to its psychological dimension; and after the Second World War Theodor Adorno and his colleagues published their influential *The Authoritarian Personality* (1950).

The period after the Second World War saw a massive burgeoning of research and publications in the social sciences generally, much of it in the United States, but later spreading into Europe and elsewhere. A great deal of this literature was highly relevant to political sociology, none more so perhaps than the work of the American sociologist, Seymour Martin Lipset, particularly *Political Man* (1960), which explored among other things the relationship between economic development and democracy and between ideology and politics, and his *First New Nation* (1963), an account of the development of national identity in the United States.

Other areas also began to receive attention, such as political socialisation, participation, and recruitment – seeking to explain how people acquired their political beliefs, how they became involved in politics, and how those who secured political office came to do so. Yet others examined the role of political communication – how political information and ideas were transmitted within society. Gradually political sociology assumed a more coherent whole, although early texts and collections of readings tended to focus on limited and selected aspects of the subject area.

Meanwhile, the existence of the USSR as a self-proclaimed communist state and the establishment of similar states in Eastern

Europe and mainland China, the continued survival of advanced capitalist states in Western Europe and North America, and the emergence of the Third World in the aftermath of post-1945 decolonisation, stimulated much activity in Marxist studies. Neo-Marxist theories developed to explain these phenomena and to revise Marx's own predictions about the inevitable collapse of capitalism and the circumstances in which it would occur. The work of Lenin, Trotsky and Mao Zedong as theorists and revolutionary practitioners played a crucial part, but others such as the members of the Frankfurt School (e.g. Adorno, Horkheimer, Marcuse, and Habermas), existentialists (e.g. Sartre), and structuralists (e.g. Althusser, Poulantzas) all made important contributions.

Marxist theorists also focused renewed attention on the role of the state in society (see Althusser 1972; Anderson 1974; Jessop 1982; Miliband 1973), discussion of which had often become arid and largely abstract in non-Marxist writings. Yet in a world of states it was a concept that political sociologists could hardly ignore. The state, actually or ostensibly, provides the framework for the exercise of political power, especially in its legitimate form and it is within the confines of the modern state that much political behaviour takes place. The development of neo-Marxist theories also played an important part in the attention paid to the role of ideology in politics, not least in that non-Marxists regard Marxism itself as an ideology.

#### THE REMIT OF POLITICAL SOCIOLOGY

Marx and Weber were of the same mind in believing that politics could only be explained and understood within a societal context, a context which was deeply historical. The strong tendency towards compartmentalism in academic studies and teaching resulted in the haphazard and piecemeal development of political sociology, leading to a concentration on some aspects of the subject and the neglect of others, and the eclecticism that pervaded the work of both men largely disappeared under the weight of specialisation. Different aspects of what may properly be claimed to be the province of political sociology were nevertheless explored and developed – elite and pluralist theories of the distribution of power, political parties (especially electoral behaviour and the conditions which appeared conducive to the development and sustenance of liberal-democratic

regimes), political socialisation and political culture, political participation, political recruitment, theories of revolutionary and evolutionary change in society, renewed interest in the state, in ideology, and in the relationship between values and society. Increasing attention was also paid to the formation of public opinion and its impact on the political process and, more recently, a revived awareness of the importance of the psychological dimension of politics. None of these areas should be seen as the exclusive province of political sociology, but taken together they contribute powerfully to political sociology being seen as a coherent area of study.

The task, then, of political sociology is to explore and explain the relationship between politics and society, between social and political institutions, and between social and political behaviour. The breadth of such a task is daunting, but no less necessary for that. For any society to be understood, so must its politics; and if the politics of any society is to be understood, so must that society. Ultimately, of course, the focus of political sociology is on those aspects of societal structures and behaviour that contribute to and explain politics. This involves exploring four major themes: the role of the state and the exercise of power; how political behaviour is related to its societal context; how values are related to a society's politics; and how societies change. These themes constitute the four main sections of the book. Within each, more particular aspects are examined in greater depth: in the first, the development of the state and its relationship to the concepts of power, authority and legitimacy; in the second, the concept of political socialisation, participation and recruitment; in the third, theories of communication, public opinion and the role of ideology; and in the fourth, theories of revolution, development, modernisation, and dependency. The final section is an assessment of what political sociology has achieved and what remains to be done.

If the remit of political sociology seems a large one, then perhaps, just as the Liberal politician Sir William Harcourt proclaimed in 1892, 'We are all socialists now', so it might be appropriate to proclaim as the theme of this book, 'We are all political sociologists now'.