CHAPTER 1

What is Politics?

'Man is by nature a political animal.'

ARISTOTLE, *Politics*, 1

PREVIEW

Politics is exciting because people disagree. They disagree about how they should live. Who should get what? How should power and other resources be distributed? Should society be based on cooperation or conflict? And so on. They also disagree about how such matters should be resolved. How should collective decisions be made? Who should have a say? How much influence should each person have? And so forth. For Aristotle, this made politics the 'master science': that is, nothing less than the activity through which human beings attempt to improve their lives and create the Good Society. Politics is, above all, a social activity. It is always a dialogue, and never a monologue. Solitary individuals such as Robinson Crusoe may be able to develop a simple economy, produce art, and so on, but they cannot engage in politics. Politics emerges only with the arrival of a Man (or Woman) Friday. Nevertheless, the disagreement that lies at the heart of politics also extends to the nature of the subject and how it should be studied. People disagree about what it is that makes social interaction 'political', whether it is where it takes place (within government, the state or the public sphere generally), or the kind of activity it involves (peacefully resolving conflict or exercising control over less powerful groups). Disagreement about the nature of politics as an academic discipline means that it embraces a range of theoretical approaches and a variety of schools of analysis. Finally, globalizing tendencies have encouraged some to speculate that the disciplinary divide between politics and international relations has now become redundant.

KEY ISSUES

- What are the defining features of politics as an activity?
- How has 'politics' been understood by various thinkers and traditions?
- What are the main approaches to the study of politics as an academic discipline?
- Can the study of politics be scientific?
- What roles do concepts, models and theories play in political analysis?
- How have globalizing trends affected the relationship between politics and international relations?

DEFINING POLITICS

Politics, in its broadest sense, is the activity through which people make, preserve and amend the general rules under which they live. Although politics is also an academic subject (sometimes indicated by the use of 'Politics' with a capital P), it is then clearly the study of this activity. Politics is thus inextricably linked to the phenomena of **conflict** and **cooperation**. On the one hand, the existence of rival opinions, different wants, competing needs and opposing interests guarantees disagreement about the rules under which people live. On the other hand, people recognize that, in order to influence these rules or ensure that they are upheld, they must work with others – hence Hannah Arendt's (see p. 7) definition of political power as 'acting in concert'. This is why the heart of 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, as not all conflicts are, or can be, resolved. Nevertheless, the inescapable presence of diversity (we are not all alike) and scarcity (there is never enough to go around) ensures that politics is an inevitable feature of the human condition.

Any attempt to clarify the meaning of 'politics' must nevertheless address two major problems. The first is the mass of associations that the word has when used in everyday language; in other words, politics is a 'loaded' term. Whereas most people think of, say, economics, geography, history and biology simply as academic subjects, few people come to politics without preconceptions. Many, for instance, automatically assume that students and teachers of politics must in some way be biased, finding it difficult to believe that the subject can be approached in an impartial and dispassionate manner (see p. 19). To make matters worse, politics is usually thought of as a 'dirty' word: it conjures up images of trouble, disruption and even violence on the one hand, and deceit, manipulation and lies on the other. There is nothing new about such associations. As long ago as 1775, Samuel Johnson dismissed politics as 'nothing more than a means of rising in the world', while in the nineteenth century the US historian Henry Adams summed up politics as 'the systematic organization of hatreds'.

The second and more intractable difficulty is that even respected authorities cannot agree what the subject is about. Politics is defined in such different ways: as the exercise of power, the science of government, the making of collective decisions, the allocation of scarce resources, the practice of deception and manipulation, and so on. The virtue of the definition advanced in this text – 'the making, preserving and amending of general social rules' – is that it is sufficiently broad to encompass most, if not all, of the competing definitions. However, problems arise when the definition is unpacked, or when the meaning is refined. 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)?

From this perspective, politics may be treated as an 'essentially contested' concept, in the sense that the term has a number of acceptable or legitimate meanings (concepts are discussed more fully later in the chapter). On the other

● **Conflict**: Competition between opposing forces, reflecting a diversity of opinions, preferences, needs or interests.

● **Cooperation**: Working together; achieving goals through collective action.

	Politics as an arena	Politics as a process
Definitions of politics	The art of government Public affairs	Compromise and consensus Power and the distribution of resources
Approaches to the study of politics	Behaviouralism Rational-choice theory Institutionalism	Feminism Marxism Post-positivist approaches

Figure 1.1 Approaches to defining politics

hand, these different views may simply consist of contrasting conceptions of the same, if necessarily vague, concept. Whether we are dealing with rival concepts or alternative conceptions, it is helpful to distinguish between two broad approaches to defining politics (Hay, 2002; Leftwich, 2004). In the first, politics is associated with an *arena* or location, in which case behaviour becomes 'political' because of where it takes place. In the second, politics is viewed as a *process* or mechanism, in which case 'political' behaviour is behaviour that exhibits distinctive characteristics or qualities, and so can take place in any, and perhaps all, social contexts. Each of these broad approaches has spawned alternative definitions of politics, and, as discussed later in the chapter, helped to shape different schools of political analysis (see Figure 1.1). Indeed, the debate about 'what is politics?' is worth pursuing precisely because it exposes some of the deepest intellectual and ideological disagreement in the academic study of the subject.

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

The word 'politics' is derived from ***polis***, meaning literally '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 city-states 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' (see p. 57). 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 that 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

● ***Polis***: (Greek) City-state; classically understood to imply the highest or most desirable form of social organization.

CONCEPT

Authority

Authority can most simply be defined as 'legitimate power'. Whereas power is the *ability* to influence the behaviour of others, authority is the *right* to do so. Authority is therefore based on an acknowledged duty to obey rather than on any form of coercion or manipulation. In this sense, authority is power cloaked in legitimacy or rightfulness. Weber (see p. 82) distinguished between three kinds of authority, based on the different grounds on which obedience can be established: *traditional* authority is rooted in history; *charismatic* authority stems from personality; and *legal–rational* authority is grounded in a set of impersonal rules.

study to focus on the personnel and machinery of government. To study politics is, in essence, to study government, or, more broadly, to study the exercise of authority. This view is advanced in the writings of the influential US political scientist David Easton (1979, 1981), who defined politics as the 'authoritative allocation of values'. 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 those that are widely accepted in society, and are considered binding by the mass of citizens. In this view, politics is associated with 'policy' (see p. 352): that is, with formal or authoritative decisions that establish a plan of action for the community.

However, what is striking about this definition is that it offers a highly restricted view of politics. Politics is what takes place within a **polity**, a system of social organization centred on the machinery of government. Politics is therefore practised 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 can be regarded as being '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'. By the same token, to portray politics as an essentially state-bound activity is to ignore the increasingly important international or global influences on modern life, as discussed in the next main section.

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

The link between politics and the affairs of the state also helps to explain why negative or pejorative images have so often been attached to politics. This is because, in the popular mind, politics is closely associated with the activities of politicians. Put brutally, politicians are often seen as power-seeking hypocrites who conceal personal ambition behind the rhetoric of public service and ideological conviction. Indeed, this perception has become more common in the modern period as intensified media exposure has more effectively brought to light examples of corruption and dishonesty, giving rise to the phenomenon of **anti-politics** (as discussed in Chapter 20). This rejection of the personnel and machinery of conventional political life is rooted in a view of politics as a self-serving, two-faced and unprincipled activity, clearly evident in the use of derogatory phrases such as 'office politics' and 'politicking'. Such an image of politics is sometimes traced back to the writings of Niccolò Machiavelli, who, in *The Prince* ([1532] 1961), developed a strictly realistic account of politics that drew attention to the use by political leaders of cunning, cruelty and manipulation.

● **Polity**: A society organized through the exercise of political authority; for Aristotle, rule by the many in the interests of all.

● **Anti-politics**: Disillusionment with formal or established political processes, reflected in non-participation, support for anti-system parties, or the use of direct action.

Niccolò Machiavelli (1469–1527)

Italian politician and author. The son of a civil lawyer, Machiavelli's knowledge of public life was gained from a sometimes precarious existence in politically unstable Florence. He served as Second Chancellor (1498–1512), and was despatched on missions to France, Germany and throughout Italy. After a brief period of imprisonment and the restoration of Medici rule, Machiavelli embarked on a literary career. His major work, *The Prince*, published in 1532, drew heavily on his first-hand observations of the statecraft of Cesare Borgia and the power politics that dominated his period. It was written as a guide for the future prince of a united Italy. The adjective 'Machiavellian' subsequently came to mean 'cunning and duplicitous'.

CONCEPT

Power

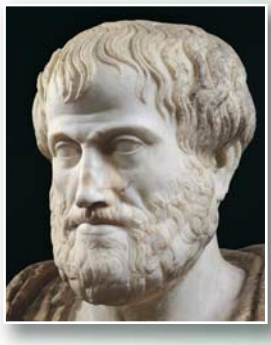
Power, in its broadest sense, is the ability to achieve a desired outcome, sometimes seen as the 'power *to*' do something. This includes everything from the ability to keep oneself alive to the ability of government to promote economic growth. In politics, however, power is usually thought of as a relationship; that is, as the ability to influence the behaviour of others in a manner not of their choosing. This implies having 'power *over*' people. More narrowly, power may be associated with the ability to punish or reward, bringing it close to force or manipulation, in contrast to 'influence'. (See 'faces' of power, p. 9 and dimensions of global power, p. 428.)

Such a negative view of politics reflects the essentially liberal perception that, as individuals are self-interested, political power is corrupting, because it encourages those 'in power' to exploit their position for personal advantage and at the expense of others. This is famously expressed in Lord Acton's (1834–1902) aphorism: 'power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely'. Nevertheless, few who view politics in this way doubt that political activity is an inevitable and permanent feature of social existence. However venal politicians may be, there is a general, if grudging, acceptance that they are always with us. Without some kind of mechanism for allocating authoritative values, society would simply disintegrate into a civil war of each against all, as the early social-contract theorists argued (see p. 62). The task is therefore not to abolish politicians and bring politics to an end but, rather, to ensure that politics is conducted within a framework of checks and constraints that guarantee that governmental power is not abused.

Politics as public affairs

A second and broader 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', by which he meant that it is only within a political community that human beings can live the 'good life'. From this viewpoint, then, politics is 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 social security system and so forth) can be regarded as 'public' in the sense that they are responsible for the collective organization of community life. Moreover, they are funded at the public's expense, out of taxation. In contrast,



Aristotle (384–322 BCE)

Greek philosopher. Aristotle was a student of Plato (see p. 13) and tutor of the young Alexander the Great. He established his own school of philosophy in Athens in 335 BCE; this was called the 'peripatetic school' after his tendency to walk up and down as he talked. His 22 surviving treatises, compiled as lecture notes, range over logic, physics, metaphysics, astronomy, meteorology, biology, ethics and politics. In the Middle Ages, Aristotle's work became the foundation of Islamic philosophy, and it was later incorporated into Christian theology. His best-known political work is *Politics*, in which he portrayed the city-state as the basis for virtue and well-being, and argued that democracy is preferable to oligarchy (see p. 267–9).

CONCEPT

Civil society

Civil society originally meant a 'political community'. The term is now more commonly distinguished from the state, and is used to describe institutions that are 'private', in that they are independent from government and organized by individuals in pursuit of their own ends. Civil society therefore refers to a realm of autonomous groups and associations: businesses, interest groups, clubs, families and so on. The term 'global civil society' (see p. 106) has become fashionable as a means of referring to nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) (see p. 248) and transnational social movements (see p. 260).

civil society consists of what Edmund Burke (see p. 36) called the 'little platoons', institutions such as 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 that are properly exercised by public bodies. Those areas of life that individuals can and do manage for themselves (the economic, social, domestic, personal, cultural and artistic spheres, and so on) are therefore clearly 'non-political'.

An alternative 'public/private' divide is sometimes defined in terms of a further and more subtle distinction; namely, that between 'the political' and 'the personal' (see Figure 1.2). 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, to which the public has access. One of the crucial implications of this is that it broadens our notion of the political, transferring the economy, in particular, from the private to the public realm. A form of politics can thus be found in the workplace. Nevertheless, although this view regards institutions such as 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 on '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 (see p. 11). This view is illustrated, for example, by the tendency of politicians to draw a clear distinction between their professional conduct and their personal or domestic behaviour. By classifying, say, cheating on their partners or treating their children badly as 'personal' matters, they are able to deny the political significance of such behaviour on the grounds that it does not touch on their conduct of public affairs.

The view of politics as an essentially 'public' activity has generated both positive and negative images. In a tradition dating back to Aristotle, politics has been seen as a noble and enlightened activity precisely because of its 'public' character. This position was firmly endorsed by Hannah Arendt, who argued in *The*

Hannah Arendt (1906–75)

German political theorist and philosopher. Hannah Arendt was brought up in a middle-class Jewish family. She fled Germany in 1933 to escape from Nazism, and finally settled in the USA, where her major work was produced. Her wide-ranging, even idiosyncratic, writing was influenced by the existentialism of Heidegger (1889–1976) and Jaspers (1883–1969); she described it as 'thinking without barriers'. Her major works include *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), which drew parallels between Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia, her major philosophical work *The Human Condition* (1958), *On Revolution* (1963) and *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1963). The final work stimulated particular controversy because it stressed the 'banality of evil', by portraying Eichmann as a Nazi functionary rather than as a raving ideologue.

Public	**Private**
The state: apparatus of government	Civil society: autonomous bodies – businesses, trade unions, clubs, families, and so on

Public	**Private**
Public realm: politics, commerce, work, art, culture and so on	Personal realm: family and domestic life

Figure 1.2 Two views of the public/private divide

Human Condition (1958) that politics is the most important form of human activity because it involves interaction amongst free and equal citizens. It thus gives meaning to life and affirms the uniqueness of each individual. Theorists such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau (see p. 97) and John Stuart Mill (see p. 198) who portrayed political participation as a good in itself have drawn similar conclusions. Rousseau argued that only through the direct and continuous participation of all citizens in political life can the state be bound to the common good, or what he called the 'general will'. In Mill's view, involvement in 'public' affairs is educational, in that it promotes the personal, moral and intellectual development of the individual.

In sharp contrast, however, politics as public activity has also been portrayed as a form of unwanted interference. Liberal theorists, in particular, have exhibited a preference for civil society over the state, on the grounds that 'private' life is a realm of choice, personal freedom and individual responsibility. This is most clearly demonstrated by attempts to narrow the realm of 'the political', commonly expressed as the wish to 'keep politics out of' private activities such

CONCEPT

Consensus

Consensus means agreement, but it refers to an agreement of a particular kind. It implies, first, a broad agreement, the terms of which are accepted by a wide range of individuals or groups. Second, it implies an agreement about fundamental or underlying principles, as opposed to a precise or exact agreement. In other words, a consensus permits disagreement on matters of emphasis or detail. A *procedural* consensus is a willingness to make decisions through a process of consultation and bargaining. A *substantive* consensus is an overlap of ideological positions that reflect agreement about broad policy goals.

as business, sport and family life. From this point of view, politics is unwholesome quite simply because it prevents people acting as they choose. For example, it may interfere with how firms conduct their business, or with how and with whom we play sports, or with how we bring up our children.

Politics as compromise and consensus

The third conception of politics relates not to the arena within which politics is conducted but to the way in which decisions are made. Specifically, politics is seen as a particular means of resolving conflict: that is, by compromise, conciliation and negotiation, rather than through force and naked power. This is what is implied when politics is portrayed as 'the art of the possible'. Such a definition is inherent in the everyday use of the term. For instance, the description of a solution to a problem as a 'political' solution implies peaceful debate and arbitration, as opposed to what is often called a 'military' solution. Once again, this view of politics has been traced back to the writings of Aristotle and, in particular, to his belief that what he called 'polity' is the ideal system of government, as it is 'mixed', in the sense that it combines both aristocratic and democratic features. One of the leading modern exponents of this view is Bernard Crick. In his classic study *In Defence of Politics*, Crick offered the following definition:

> 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 community. (Crick, [1962] 2000)

In this view, 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'. Such a view of politics reflects a deep commitment to liberal–rationalist principles. It is based on resolute faith in the efficacy of debate and discussion, as well as on the belief that society is characterized by consensus, rather than by irreconcilable conflict. In other words, the disagreements that exist *can* be resolved without 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.

This view of politics has an unmistakeably positive character. Politics is certainly no utopian solution (compromise means that concessions are made by all sides, leaving no one perfectly satisfied), but it is undoubtedly preferable to the alternatives: bloodshed and brutality. In this sense, politics can be seen as a civilized and civilizing force. People should be encouraged to respect politics as an activity, and should be prepared to engage in the political life of their own community. Nevertheless, a failure to understand that politics as a process of compromise and reconciliation is neccessarily frustrating and difficult (because in involves listening carefully to the opinions of others) may have contributed to a growing popular disenchantment with democratic politics across much of the

developed world. As Stoker (2006) put it, 'Politics is designed to disappoint'; its outcomes are 'often messy, ambiguous and never final'. This is an issue to which we will return in the final chapter of the book.

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 view sees politics at work in all social activities and in every corner of human existence. As Adrian Leftwich proclaimed in *What is Politics? The Activity and Its Study* (2004), 'politics is at the heart of *all* collective social activity, formal and informal, public and private, in *all* human groups, institutions and societies'. 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 amongst 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?

Focus on . . .

'Faces' of power

Power can be said to be exercised whenever A gets B to do something that B would not otherwise have done. However, A can influence B in various ways. This allows us to distinguish between different dimensions or 'faces' of power:

- **Power as decision-making**: This face of power consists of conscious actions that in some way influence the content of decisions. The classic account of this form of power is found in Robert Dahl's *Who Governs? Democracy and Power in an American City* (1961), which made judgements about who had power by analysing decisions in the light of the known preferences of the actors involved. Such decisions can nevertheless be influenced in a variety of ways. In *Three Faces of Power* (1989), Keith Boulding distinguished between the use of force or intimidation (the stick), productive exchanges involving mutual gain (the deal), and the creation of obligations, loyalty and commitment (the kiss).
- **Power as agenda setting**: The second face of power, as suggested by Bachrach and Baratz (1962), is the ability to prevent decisions being made: that is, in effect, 'non-decision-making'. This involves the ability to set or control the political agenda, thereby preventing issues or proposals from being aired in the first place. For instance, private businesses may exert power both by campaigning to defeat proposed consumer-protection legislation (first face), and by lobbying parties and politicians to prevent the question of consumer rights being publicly discussed (second face).
- **Power as thought control**: The third face of power is the ability to influence another by shaping what he or she thinks, wants, or needs. This is power expressed as ideological indoctrination or psychological control. This is what Lukes (2004) called the 'radical' view of power, and it overlaps with the notion of 'soft' power (see p. 428). An example of this would be the ability of advertising to shape consumer tastes, often by cultivating associations with a 'brand'. In political life, the exercise of this form of power is seen in the use of propaganda and, more generally, in the impact of ideology (see p. 28).

At its broadest, politics concerns the production, distribution and use of resources in the course of social existence. Politics is, in essence, 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?* (1936). From this perspective, politics is about diversity and conflict, but the essential ingredient is the existence of scarcity: the simple fact that, while human needs and desires are infinite, the resources available to satisfy them are always limited. Politics can therefore be seen as a struggle over scarce resources, and power can be seen as the means through which this struggle is conducted.

Advocates of the view of politics as power include feminists and Marxists. The rise of the women's liberation movement in the 1960s and 1970s, bringing with it a growing interest in feminism, stimulated more radical thinking about the nature of 'the political'. Not only have modern feminists sought to expand the arenas in which politics can be seen to take place, a notion most boldly asserted through the radical feminist slogan 'the personal is the political', but they have also tended to view politics as a process, specifically one related to the exercise of power over others. This view was summed by Kate Millett in *Sexual Politics* (1969), in which she defined politics as 'power-structured relationships, arrangements whereby one group of persons is controlled by another'.

Marxists, for their part, have used the term 'politics' in two senses. On one level, Marx (see p. 41) used 'politics' in a conventional sense to refer to the apparatus of the state. In the *Communist Manifesto* ([1848] 1967), he (and Engels) thus referred to political power as 'merely the organized power of one class for oppressing another'. For Marx, politics, together with law and culture, are part of a 'superstructure' that is distinct from the economic 'base' that is the real foundation of social life. However, he did not see the economic 'base' and the legal and political 'superstructure' as entirely separate. He believed that the 'superstructure' arose out of, and reflected, the economic 'base'. At a deeper level, political power, in this view, is therefore rooted in the class system; as Lenin (see p. 99) put it, 'politics is the most concentrated form of economics'. As opposed to 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, characterized as Marxists believe it to be by class struggle, is the very heart of politics.

Views such as these portray politics in largely negative terms. Politics is, quite simply, about oppression and subjugation. Radical feminists hold that society is patriarchal, in that women are systematically subordinated and subjected to male power. Marxists traditionally argued that politics in a capitalist society is characterized by the exploitation of the proletariat by the bourgeoisie. On the other hand, these negative implications are balanced against the fact that politics is also seen as an emancipating force, a means through which injustice and domination can be challenged. Marx, for instance, predicted that class exploitation would be overthrown by a proletarian revolution, and radical feminists proclaim the need for gender relations to be reordered through a sexual revolution. However, it is also clear that when politics is portrayed as power and domination it need not be seen as an inevitable feature of social existence. Feminists look to an end of 'sexual politics' achieved through the construction of a non-sexist society, in which people will be valued according to personal worth, rather than on the basis of gender. Marxists believe that 'class politics' will end with the

POLITICS IN ACTION . . .

The rise of Women's Liberation: making politics personal?

Events: Although an organized women's movement first emerged in the mid-nineteenth century, focused on the campaign for female suffrage, it was not until the 1960s that it was regenerated through the birth of the Women's Liberation Movement. Often viewed as the 'second wave' of feminism, this reflected the belief that redressing the status of women required not just political reform, but a process of radical, and particularly cultural, change, brought about by 'consciousness raising' amongst women and the transformation of family, domestic and personal life. Protests designed to challenge conventional stereotypes of 'femininity' took place: for example, at the Miss America pageants in 1968 and 1969 (where, by throwing stiletto shoes and other symbols of oppression into a 'freedom trashcan', demonstrators claimed a great deal of publicity and also acquired a false reputation for bra burning), and at the 1970 Miss World beauty competition (where, in front of millions of television viewers worldwide, about fifty women and a few men started to throw flour bombs, stink bombs, ink bombs and leaflets at the stage). This radical phase of feminist activism subsided from the early 1970s onwards, but the women's movement nevertheless continued to grow and acquired an increasingly prominent international dimension.

Significance: The 'first wave' of feminist activism, in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, was framed within a largely conventional notion of 'politics'. As the primary goal of feminism during this period was 'votes for women', it complied with the idea that politics takes place within a 'public' sphere of government institutions, political parties, interest groups and public debate. Female emancipation was therefore defined in terms of access to the public sphere, and especially the acquisition of political rights already enjoyed by men. One of the central themes of the 'second-wave' of feminism, however, has been that it sought to challenge and overthrow traditional thinking about politics, both about the nature of politics and where it takes place. Radical feminists in particular objected to the idea that politics is rooted in the public/private divide. In the first place, they argued that associating politics only with activities that take place in the public sphere effectively excludes women from political life. This is because, albeit to varying degrees, all contemporary and historical societies are characterized by a sexual division of labour in which the public sphere, encompassing politics (as conventionally understood), work, art and literature, has been the preserve of men, while women have been predominantly confined to a 'private' existence, centred on the family and domestic responsibilities. Moreover, if politics focuses only on public activities and institutions, the sexual division of labour between 'public man' and 'private woman' appears, somehow, to be a natural fact of life, rather than a key mechanism through which the system of male power is established and preserved.

Nevertheless, the most influential feature of the radical feminist critique of conventional view of politics is that it emphasizes that politics takes place not only in the public sphere but also, and more significantly, in the private sphere. This idea was advanced through the slogan: 'the personal is the political'. By redefining politics in terms of power, control and domination, radical feminists portrayed family and domestic life as the crucial political arena because the dominance of the husband-father over both his wife and children conditions girls and boys to accept quite different social roles and to have quite different life expectations. The patriarchal structure of family life thus reproduces male domination in society at large, generation by generation. If, from this perspective, women are going to challenge patriarchal oppression, they must start with 'the personal', instead of primarily addressing problems such as the under-representation of women in senior positions in public life, they should focus on their underlying cause: the contrasting stereotypes of 'masculinity' and 'femininity' that are nurtured within the family and which accustom men to domination and encourage women to accept subordination.

establishment of a classless communist society. This, in turn, will eventually lead to the 'withering away' of the state, also bringing politics in the conventional sense to an end.

STUDYING POLITICS

Approaches to the study of politics

Disagreement about the nature of political activity is matched by controversy about the nature of politics as an academic discipline. One of the most ancient spheres of intellectual enquiry, politics was originally seen as an arm of philosophy, history or law. Its central purpose was to uncover the principles on which human society should be based. From the late nineteenth century onwards, however, this philosophical emphasis was gradually displaced by an attempt to turn politics into a scientific discipline. The high point of this development was reached in the 1950s and 1960s with an open rejection of the earlier tradition as meaningless metaphysics. Since then, however, enthusiasm for a strict science of politics has waned, and there has been a renewed recognition of the enduring importance of political values and normative theories. If the 'traditional' search for universal values acceptable to everyone has largely been abandoned, so has been the insistence that science alone provides a means of disclosing truth. The resulting discipline is more fertile and more exciting, precisely because it embraces a range of theoretical approaches and a variety of schools of analysis.

The philosophical tradition

The origins of political analysis date back to Ancient Greece and a tradition usually referred to as 'political philosophy'. This involved a preoccupation with essentially ethical, prescriptive or **normative** questions, reflecting a concern with what 'should', 'ought' or 'must' be brought about, rather than with what 'is'. Plato and Aristotle are usually identified as the founding fathers of this tradition. Their ideas resurfaced in the writings of medieval theorists such as Augustine (354–430) and Aquinas (1225–74). The central theme of Plato's work, for instance, was an attempt to describe the nature of the ideal society, which in his view took the form of a benign dictatorship dominated by a class of philosopher kings.

Such writings have formed the basis of what is called the 'traditional' approach to politics. This involves the analytical study of ideas and doctrines that have been central to political thought. Most commonly, it has taken the form of a history of political thought that focuses on a collection of 'major' thinkers (that spans, for instance, Plato to Marx) and a canon of 'classic' texts. This approach has the character of literary analysis: it is interested primarily in examining what major thinkers said, how they developed or justified their views, and the intellectual context within which they worked. Although such analysis may be carried out critically and scrupulously, it cannot be **objective** in any scientific sense, as it deals with normative questions such as 'Why should I obey the state?', 'How should rewards be distributed?' and 'What should the limits of individual freedom be?'

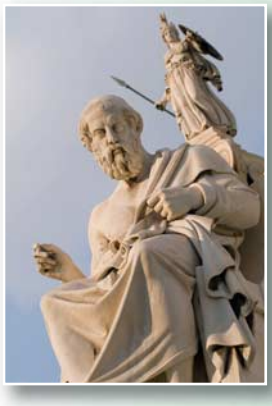
CONCEPT

Science

Science is a field of study that aims to develop reliable explanations of phenomena through repeatable experiments, observation and deduction. The 'scientific method', by which hypotheses are verified (proved true) by testing them against the available evidence, is therefore seen as a means of disclosing value-free and objective truth. Karl Popper (1902–94), however, suggested that science can only falsify hypotheses, since 'facts' may always be disproved by later experiments.

● **Normative**: The prescription of values and standards of conduct; what 'should be' rather than what 'is'.

● **Objective**: External to the observer, demonstrable; untainted by feelings, values or bias.



Plato (427–347 BCE)

Greek philosopher. Plato was born of an aristocratic family. He became a follower of Socrates, who is the principal figure in his ethical and philosophical dialogues. After Socrates' death in 399 BCE, Plato founded his own academy in order to train the new Athenian ruling class. Plato taught that the material world consists of imperfect copies of abstract and eternal 'ideas'. His political philosophy, expounded in *The Republic* and *The Laws*, is an attempt to describe the ideal state in terms of a theory of justice. Both works are decidedly authoritarian and pay no attention to individual liberty, believing that power should be vested in the hands of an educated elite, the philosopher kings. He was therefore a firm critic of democracy. Plato's work has exerted wide influence on Christianity and on European culture in general.

The empirical tradition

Although it was less prominent than normative theorizing, a descriptive or **empirical** tradition can be traced back to the earliest days of political thought. It can be seen in Aristotle's attempt to classify constitutions (see pp. 267–8), in Machiavelli's realistic account of statecraft, and in Montesquieu's (see p. 312) sociological theory of government and law. In many ways, such writings constitute the basis of what is now called 'comparative government', and they gave rise to an essentially institutional approach to the discipline. In the USA, and the UK in particular, this developed into the dominant tradition of analysis. The empirical approach to political analysis is characterized by the attempt to offer a dispassionate and impartial account of political reality. The approach is 'descriptive', in that it seeks to analyse and explain, whereas the normative approach is 'prescriptive', in the sense that it makes judgements and offers recommendations.

Descriptive political analysis acquired its philosophical underpinning from the doctrine of empiricism, which spread from the seventeenth century onwards through the work of theorists such as John Locke (see p. 31) and David Hume (1711–76). The doctrine of empiricism advanced the belief that experience is the only basis of knowledge and that, therefore, all hypotheses and theories should be tested by a process of observation. By the nineteenth century, such ideas had developed into what became known as 'positivism', an intellectual movement particularly associated with the writings of Auguste Comte (1798–1857). This doctrine proclaimed that the social sciences, and, for that matter, all forms of philosophical enquiry, should adhere strictly to the methods of the natural sciences. Once science was perceived to be the only reliable means of disclosing truth, the pressure to develop a science of politics became irresistible.

● **Empirical**: Based on observation and experiment; empirical knowledge is derived from sense data and experience.

● **Positivism**: The theory that social, and indeed all forms of, enquiry should adhere strictly to the methods of the natural sciences.

Behaviouralism

Since the mid-nineteenth century, mainstream political analysis has been dominated by the 'scientific' tradition, reflecting the growing impact of **positivism**. In the 1870s, 'political science' courses were introduced in the universities of

Oxford, Paris and Columbia, and by 1906 the *American Political Science Review* was being published. However, enthusiasm for a science of politics peaked in the 1950s and 1960s with the emergence, most strongly in the USA, of a form of political analysis that drew heavily on **behaviouralism**. For the first time, this gave politics reliably scientific credentials, because it provided what had previously been lacking: objective and quantifiable data against which hypotheses could be tested. Political analysts such as David Easton (1979, 1981) proclaimed that politics could adopt the methodology of the natural sciences, and this gave rise to a proliferation of studies in areas best suited to the use of quantitative research methods, such as voting behaviour, the behaviour of legislators, and the behaviour of municipal politicians and lobbyists. Attempts were also made to apply behaviouralism to IR, in the hope of developing objective 'laws' of international relations.

Behaviouralism, however, came under growing pressure from the 1960s onwards. In the first place, it was claimed that behaviouralism had significantly constrained the scope of political analysis, preventing it from going beyond what was directly observable. Although behavioural analysis undoubtedly produced, and continues to produce, invaluable insights in fields such as voting studies, a narrow obsession with quantifiable data threatens to reduce the discipline of politics to little else. More worryingly, it inclined a generation of political scientists to turn their backs on the entire tradition of normative political thought. Concepts such as 'liberty', 'equality', 'justice' and 'rights' were sometimes discarded as being meaningless because they were not empirically verifiable entities. Dissatisfaction with behaviouralism grew as interest in normative questions revived in the 1970s, as reflected in the writings of theorists such as John Rawls (see p. 45) and Robert Nozick (see p. 68).

Moreover, the scientific credentials of behaviouralism started to be called into question. The basis of the assertion that behaviouralism is objective and reliable is the claim that it is 'value-free': that is, that it is not contaminated by ethical or normative beliefs. However, if the focus of analysis is observable behaviour, it is difficult to do much more than describe the existing political arrangements, which implicitly means that the status quo is legitimized. This conservative value **bias** was demonstrated by the fact that 'democracy' was, in effect, redefined in terms of observable behaviour. Thus, instead of meaning 'popular self-government' (literally, government by the people), democracy came to stand for a struggle between competing elites to win power through the mechanism of popular election. In other words, democracy came to mean what goes on in the so-called democratic political systems of the developed West.

● **Behaviouralism**: The belief that social theories should be constructed only on the basis of observable behaviour, providing quantifiable data for research.

● **Bias**: Sympathies or prejudices that (often unconsciously) affect human judgement; bias implies distortion (see 'political bias', p. 183).

Rational-choice theory

Amongst recent theoretical approaches to politics is what is called 'formal political theory', variously known as 'rational-choice theory', 'public-choice theory' (see p. 252) and 'political economy' (see p. 129). This approach to analysis draws heavily on the example of economic theory in building up models based on procedural rules, usually about the rationally self-interested behaviour of the individuals involved. Most firmly established in the USA, and associated in particular with the so-called Virginia School, formal political theory provides at

least a useful analytical device, which may provide insights into the actions of voters, lobbyists, bureaucrats and politicians, as well as into the behaviour of states within the international system. This approach has had its broadest impact on political analysis in the form of what is called 'institutional public-choice theory'. The use of such techniques by writers such as Anthony Downs (1957), Mancur Olson (1968) and William Niskanen (1971), in fields such as party competition, interest-group behaviour and the policy influence of bureaucrats, is discussed in later chapters. The approach has also been applied in the form of game theory, which has been developed more from the field of mathematics than from economics. It entails the use of first principles to analyse puzzles about individual behaviour. The best-known example in game theory is the 'prisoners' dilemma' (see Figure 1.5). Game theory has been used by IR theorists to explain why states find it difficult, for instance, to prevent the overfishing of the seas, or the scale of arms to undesirable regimes.

By no means, however, has the rational-choice approach to political analysis been universally accepted. While its supporters claim that it introduces greater rigour into the discussion of political phenomena, critics have questioned its basic assumptions. It may, for instance, overestimate human rationality in that it ignores the fact that people seldom possess a clear set of preferred goals and rarely make decisions in the light of full and accurate knowledge. Furthermore, in proceeding from an abstract model of the individual, rational-choice theory pays insufficient attention to social and historical factors, failing to recognize, amongst other things, that human self-interestedness may be socially conditioned, and not merely innate.

New institutionalism

Until the 1950s, the study of politics had largely involved the study of **institutions**. This 'traditional' or 'old' institutionalism focused on the rules, procedures and formal organization of government, and employed methods akin to those used in the study of law and history. The advent of the 'behavioural revolution', combined with growing concerns about its unreflective and essentially descriptive methods (which sometimes threatened to reduce politics to a collection of organizational rules and structures), led to institutionalism being marginalized during the 1960s and 1970s. However, interest in it was revived from the 1980s onwards by the emergence of what was called 'new institutionalism'. While remaining faithful to the core institutionalist belief that 'institutions matter', in the sense that political structures are thought to shape political behaviour, new institutionalism has revised our understanding of what constitutes an 'institution' in a number of respects.

Political institutions are no longer equated with political organizations; they are thought of not as 'things' but as sets of 'rules', which guide or constrain the behaviour of individual actors. These rules, moreover, are as likely to be informal as formal, policy-making processes sometimes being shaped more by unwritten conventions or understandings than by formal arrangements. Apart from anything else, this can help to explain why institutions are often difficult to reform, transform or replace. Finally, rather than viewing institutions as independent entities, in which case they exist almost outside of time and space, new institutionalists emphasize that institutions are 'embedded' in a particular

● **Institution**: A well-established body with a formal role and status; more broadly, a set of rules that ensure regular and predictable behaviour, the 'rules of the game'.

CONCEPT

Constructivism

Constructivism (or social constructivism) is an approach to analysis that is based on the belief that there is no objective social or political reality independent of our understanding of it. Constructivists do not therefore regard the social world as something 'out there', in the sense of an external world of concrete objects; instead, it exists only 'inside', as a kind of inter-subjective awareness. In the final analysis, people, whether acting as individuals or as social groups, 'construct' the world according to those constructions. People's beliefs and assumptions become particularly significant when they are widely shared and create a sense of identity and distinctive interests.

normative and historical context. Thus, just as actors within an institutional setting are socialized to accept key rules and procedures, the institution itself operates within a larger and more fundamental body of assumptions and practices. Nevertheless, despite these shifts, institutionalism has continued to attract criticism. For example, it is sometimes accused of subscribing to a structuralist logic in which, to a greater or lesser extent, political actors are viewed as 'prisoners' of the institutional contexts in which they operate.

Critical approaches

Since the 1980s, the range of critical approaches to politics has expanded considerably. Until that point, Marxism had constituted the principal alternative to mainstream political science. Indeed, Karl Marx can be seen as the first theorist to have attempted to describe politics in scientific terms. Using his so-called 'materialist conception of history' (see pp. 40–1), Marx strove to uncover the driving force of historical development. This enabled him to make predictions about the future based on 'laws' that had the same status in terms of proof as laws in the natural sciences. However, modern political analysis has become both richer and more diverse as a result of the emergence of new critical perspectives, notable examples including feminism (see pp. 49–50), critical theory, green politics (see pp. 50–1), constructivism, post-structuralism and postcolonialism (see p. 52). What do these new critical voices have in common, and in what sense are they 'critical'? In view of their diverse philosophical underpinnings and contrasting political viewpoints, it is tempting to argue that the only thing that unites them is a shared antipathy towards mainstream thinking.

Nevertheless, they exemplify two broad, and sometimes linked, characteristics. The first is that they are 'critical' in that, in their different ways, they seek to contest the political status quo, by (usually) aligning themselves with the interests of marginalized or oppressed groups. Each of them, thus, seeks to uncover inequalities and asymmetries that mainstream approaches intend to ignore. Feminism, for example, has drawn attention to systematic and pervasive structures of gender inequality that characterize politics in all its forms and at every level. Critical theory, which is rooted in the neo-Marxism (see p. 64) of the Frankfurt School, has extended the notion of critique to all social practices, drawing on a wide range of influences, including Freud and Weber (see p. 82). Green politics, or ecologism (see p. 51), has challenged the anthropocentric (human-centred) emphasis of established political and social theory, and championed holistic approaches to political and social understanding. Postcolonialism emphasizes the cultural dimension of colonial rule, showing how western cultural and political hegemony (see p. 174) over the rest of the world has been preserved despite the achievement of formal political independence across almost the entire developing world.

The second characteristic of critical approaches to politics is that, albeit in different ways and to different degrees, they have tried to go beyond the positivism of mainstream political science, emphasizing instead the role of consciousness in shaping social conduct and, therefore, the political world. These so-called **post-positivist** approaches (sometimes called 'interpretivism' or 'anti-foundationalism') are therefore 'critical', in that they not only take issue with the conclusions of mainstream approaches, but also subject these

● **Post-positivism**: An approach to knowledge that questions the idea of an 'objective' reality, emphasizing instead the extent to which people conceive, or 'construct', the world in which they live.

Focus on . . .

The prisoners' dilemma

Two prisoners, held in separate cells, are faced with the choice of 'squealing' or 'not squealing' on one another. If only one of them confesses, but provides evidence to convict the other, he will be released without charge, while his partner will take the whole blame and be jailed for ten years. If both prisoners confess, they will each be jailed for six years. If both refuse to confess, they will only be convicted of a minor crime, and they will each receive a one-year sentence. Figure 1.3 shows the options available to the prisoners and their consequences in terms of jail sentences.

		Prisoner B: Confesses	Prisoner B: Does not confess
Prisoner A	Confesses	**A:** 6 yrs **B:** 6 yrs	**A:** 0 yrs **B:** 10 yrs
Prisoner A	Does not confess	**A:** 10 yrs **B:** 0 yrs	**A:** 1 yr **B:** 1 yr

Figure 1.3 Options in the prisoners' dilemma

In view of the dilemma confronting them it is likely that both prisoners will confess, fearing that if they do not the other will 'squeal' and they will receive the maximum sentence. Ironically, the game shows that rational behaviour can result in the least favourable outcome (in which the prisoners jointly serve a total of 12 years in jail). In effect, they are punished for their failure to cooperate or trust one another. However, if the game is repeated several times, it is possible that the prisoners will learn that self-interest is advanced by cooperation, which will encourage both to refuse to confess.

approaches themselves to critical scrutiny, exposing biases that operate within them and examining their implications. This can be seen, in particular, in relation to constructivism and post-structuralism. Constructivism has had a significantly greater impact on IR than it has had on political science, with many now treating constructivism as a mainstream international relations theory. However, constructivism is not so much a substantive theory as an analytical tool. In arguing that people, in effect, 'construct' the world in which they live, suggesting that the world operates through a kind of 'inter-subjective' awareness, constructivists have thrown mainstream political analysis's claim to objectivity into question. For example, as subjective entities, political actors have no fixed or objective interests or identities; rather, these are fashioned (and can be re-fashioned) through the traditions, values and sentiments that prevail at any time.

Post-structuralism emerged alongside postmodernism (see p. 18), the two terms sometimes being used interchangeably. Post-structuralism emphasizes that all ideas and concepts are expressed in language which itself is enmeshed in complex relations of power. Influenced particularly by the writings of the French philosopher and radical intellectual Michel Foucault (1926–84), post-

CONCEPT

Postmodernism

Postmodernism is a term that was first used to describe experimental movements in western arts, architecture and cultural development in general. As a tool of social and political analysis, postmodernism highlights the shift away from societies structured by industrialization and class solidarity to increasingly fragmented and pluralistic 'information' societies. In these, individuals are transformed from producers to consumers, and individualism replaces class, religious and ethnic loyalties. Postmodernists argue that there is no such thing as certainty; the idea of absolute and universal truth must be discarded as an arrogant pretence.

structuralists have drawn attention to the link between power and systems of thought using the idea of **discourse**, or 'discourses of power'. In crude terms, this implies that knowledge is power. However, in the absence of a universal frame of reference or overarching perspective, there exists only a series of competing perspectives, each of which represents a particular discourse of power. Although post-structuralism and postmodernism reject the idea of absolute and universal truth (foundationalism), post-structuralists argue that it is possible to expose hidden meanings in particular concepts, theories and interpretations through a process of **deconstruction**.

Concepts, models and theories

Concepts, models and theories are the tools of political analysis. However, as with most things in politics, the analytical tools must be used with care. First, let us consider concepts. A concept is a general idea about something, usually expressed in a single word or a short phrase. A concept is more than a proper noun or the name of a thing. There is, for example, a difference between talking about a cat (a particular and unique cat) and having a concept of a 'cat' (the idea of a cat). The concept of a cat is not a 'thing' but an 'idea', an idea composed of the various attributes that give a cat its distinctive character: 'a furry mammal', 'small', 'domesticated', 'catches rats and mice', and so on. The concept of 'equality' is thus a principle or ideal. This is different from using the term to say that a runner has 'equalled' a world record, or that an inheritance is to be shared 'equally' between two brothers. In the same way, the concept of 'presidency' refers not to any specific president but, rather, to a set of ideas about the organization of executive power.

What, then, is the value of concepts? Concepts are the tools with which we think, criticize, argue, explain and analyse. Merely perceiving the external world does not in itself give us knowledge about it. In order to make sense of the world, we must, in a sense, impose meaning on it, and this we do through the construction of concepts. Quite simply, to treat a cat as a cat, we must first have a concept of what it is. Concepts also help us to classify objects by recognizing that they have similar forms or similar properties. A cat, for instance, is a member of the class of 'cats'. Concepts are therefore 'general': they can relate to a number of objects, indeed to any object that complies with the characteristics of the general idea itself. It is no exaggeration to say that our knowledge of the political world is built up through developing and refining concepts that help us make sense of that world. Concepts, in that sense, are the building blocks of human knowledge.

Nevertheless, concepts can also be slippery customers. In the first place, the political reality we seek to understand is constantly shifting and is highly complex. There is always the danger that concepts such as 'democracy', 'human rights' and 'capitalism' will be more rounded and coherent than the unshapely realities they seek to describe. Max Weber tried to overcome this problem by recognizing particular concepts as 'ideal types'. This view implies that the concepts we use are constructed by singling out certain basic or central features of the phenomenon in question, which means that other features are downgraded or ignored altogether. The concept of 'revolution' can be regarded as an ideal type in this sense, in that it draws attention to a process of fundamental,

● **Discourse**: Human interaction, especially communication; discourse may disclose or illustrate power relations.

● **Deconstruction**: A close reading of philosophical or other texts with an eye to their various blind spots and/or contradictions.

Debating . . .

Should students of politics seek to be objective and politically neutral?

Many believe that a strict distinction should be drawn between studying politics and practising politics, between having an academic interest in the subject and being politically engaged or committed. But does this distinction stand up to examination? Should we (teachers as well as students) approach the study of politics in a neutral manner, adopting a stance of 'scientific' objectivity? Or should we accept that, in politics, interest and commitment are inevitably linked, and even that political conviction may drive political understanding?

YES

Desire to explain. The motives for studying politics and practising politics are – or should be – different. Students of politics should seek, above all, to understand and explain the (all too often complex and baffling) political world. As they want to 'make sense' of things, any personal preferences they may hold must be treated as of strictly secondary importance. In contrast, practitioners of politics (politicians, activists and the like) are principally concerned with reshaping the political world in line with their own convictions or preferences. Political convictions thus blind people to 'inconvenient' truths, allowing political analysis to service the needs of political advocacy.

Objective knowledge. There is an approach to the acquisition of knowledge that has unrivalled authority in the form of scientific method, and this should be applied to all areas of learning, politics (or 'political science') included. Using observation, measurement and experimentation, scientific method allows hypotheses to be verified or falsified by comparing them with what we know about the 'real world'. Systematic enquiry, guided by such scientific principles, is the only reliable means of producing and accumulating knowledge. This knowledge is 'objective' because it is generated through a value-free approach that is concerned with empirical questions and does not seek to make normative judgements.

Free-floating intellectuals. Education and intellectual enquiry are themselves a training-ground in dispassionate scholarship, allowing students and teachers to distance themselves, over time, from the allegiances and biases that derive from social and family backgrounds. The German sociologist Karl Mannheim (1893–1947) thus argued that objectivity is strictly the preserve of the 'socially unattached intelligentsia', a class of intellectuals who alone can engage in disciplined and dispassionate enquiry. As free-floating intellectuals, they can stand back from the world they seek to understand, and thereby see it more clearly.

NO

Myth of neutrality. Whereas natural scientists may be able to approach their studies from an objective and impartial standpoint, this is impossible in politics. However politics is defined, it addresses questions about the structure and functioning of the society in which we live and have grown up. Family background, social experience, economic position, political sympathies and so on therefore build into each and every one of us preconceptions about the political world we are seeking to study. Indeed, perhaps the greatest threat to reliable knowledge comes not from bias as such, but from the failure to acknowledge bias, reflected in bogus claims to political neutrality.

Emancipatory knowledge. Very few people are drawn to the study of politics through a disinterested quest for knowledge alone. Instead, they seek knowledge for a purpose, and that purpose invariably has a normative component. As Marx famously put it, 'The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it'. Such an approach is most clearly embraced by modern critical theorists, who adopt an explicit commitment to emancipatory politics. The purpose of critical theory is to uncover structures of oppression and injustice in domestic and global politics in order to advance the cause of individual and collective freedom.

Competing realities. Post-positivist theorists question the very idea of scientific objectivity, arguing that there is more than one way in which the world can be understood. There is thus no single, overarching truth about the 'real world' out there, separate from the beliefs, ideas and assumptions of the observer. If the subject (the student of politics) cannot in any reliable way be distinguished from the object (the political world), then dispassionate scholarship must be treated as, at best, an unachievable ideal, social and political analysis being an inevitably value-laden activity.

CONCEPT

Ideal type

An ideal type (sometimes 'pure type') is a mental construct in which an attempt is made to draw out meaning from an otherwise almost infinitely complex reality through the presentation of a logical extreme. Ideal types were first used in economics, for instance, in the notion of perfect competition. Championed in the social sciences by Max Weber, ideal types are explanatory tools, not approximations of reality; they neither 'exhaust reality' nor offer an ethical ideal. Weberian examples include types of authority (see p. 4) and bureaucracy (see p. 361).

and usually violent, political change. It thus helps us make sense of, say, the 1789 French Revolution and the Eastern European revolutions of 1989–91 by highlighting important parallels between them. The concept must nevertheless be used with care because it can also conceal vital differences, and thereby distort understanding – in this case, for example, about the ideological and social character of revolution. Sartori (1970) highlighted similar tendencies by drawing attention to the phenomena of conceptual 'travelling' (the application of concepts to new cases) and conceptual 'stretching' (the distortion that occurs when these concepts do not fit the new cases). For these reason, it is better to think of concepts or ideal types not as being 'true' or 'false', but as being more or less 'useful'.

A further problem is that political concepts are often the subject of deep ideological controversy. Politics is, in part, a struggle over the legitimate meaning of terms and concepts. Enemies may argue, fight and even go to war, all claiming to be 'defending freedom', 'upholding democracy' or 'having justice on their side'. The problem is that words such as 'freedom', 'democracy' and 'justice' have different meanings to different people. How can we establish what is 'true' democracy, 'true' freedom or 'true' justice? The simple answer is that we cannot. Just as with the attempt to define 'politics', we have to accept that there are competing versions of many political concepts. Such concepts are best regarded as 'essentially contested' concepts (Gallie, 1955/56), in that controversy about them runs so deep that no neutral or settled definition can ever be developed. In effect, a single term can represent a number of rival concepts, none of which can be accepted as its 'true' meaning. For example, it is equally legitimate to define politics as what concerns the state, as the conduct of public life, as debate and conciliation, and as the distribution of power and resources.

Models and theories are broader than concepts; they comprise a range of ideas rather than a single idea. A **model** is usually thought of as a representation of something, usually on a smaller scale, as in the case of a doll's house or a toy aeroplane. In this sense, the purpose of the model is to resemble the original object as faithfully as possible. However, conceptual models need not in any way resemble an object. It would be absurd, for instance, to insist that a computer model of the economy should bear a physical resemblance to the economy itself. Rather, conceptual models are analytical tools; their value is that they are devices through which meaning can be imposed on what would otherwise be a bewildering and disorganized collection of facts. The simple point is that facts do not speak for themselves: they must be interpreted, and they must be organized. Models assist in the accomplishment of this task because they include a network of relationships that highlight the meaning and significance of relevant empirical data. The best way of understanding this is through an example. One of the most influential models in political analysis is the model of the political system developed by David Easton (1979, 1981). This can be represented diagrammatically (see Figure 1.4).

● **Model**: A theoretical representation of empirical data that aims to advance understanding by highlighting significant relationships and interactions.

This ambitious model sets out to explain the entire political process, as well as the function of major political actors, through the application of what is called systems analysis. A system is an organized or complex whole, a set of interrelated and interdependent parts that form a collective entity. In the case of the political system, a linkage exists between what Easton calls 'inputs' and 'outputs'. Inputs

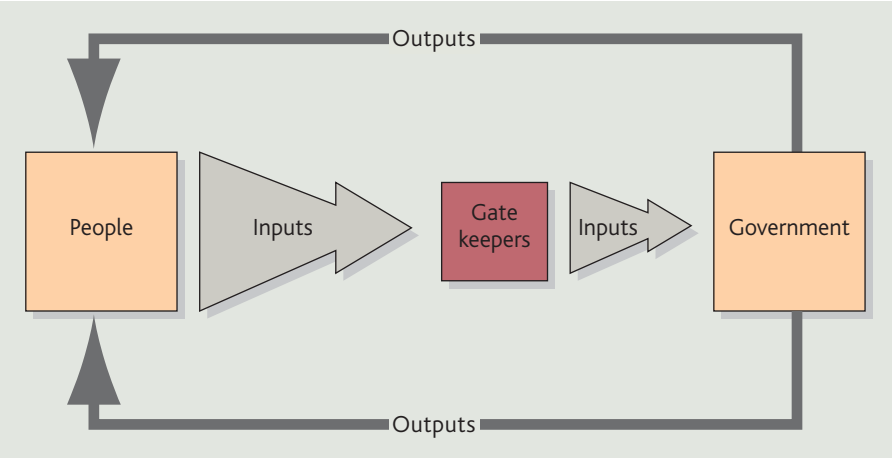


Figure 1.4 The political system

into the political system consist of demands and supports from the general public. Demands can range from pressure for higher living standards, improved employment prospects, and more generous welfare payments to greater protection for minority and individual rights. Supports, on the other hand, are ways in which the public contributes to the political system by paying taxes, offering compliance, and being willing to participate in public life. Outputs consist of the decisions and actions of government, including the making of policy, the passing of laws, the imposition of taxes, and the allocation of public funds. Clearly, these outputs generate 'feedback' which, in turn, shapes further demands and supports. The key insight offered by Easton's model is that the political system tends towards long-term equilibrium or political stability, as its survival depends on outputs being brought into line with inputs.

However, it is vital to remember that conceptual models are at best simplifications of the reality they seek to explain. They are merely devices for drawing out understanding; they are not reliable knowledge. In the case of Easton's model, for example, political parties and interest groups are portrayed as 'gatekeepers', the central function of which is to regulate the flow of inputs into the political system. Although this may be one of their significant functions, parties and interest groups also manage public perceptions, and thereby help to shape the nature of public demands. In short, these are more interesting and more complex institutions in reality than the systems model suggests. In the same way, Easton's model is more effective in explaining how and why political systems respond to popular pressures than it is in explaining why they employ repression and coercion, as, to some degree, all do.

The terms '**theory**' and 'model' are often used interchangeably in politics. Theories and models are both conceptual constructs used as tools of political analysis. However, strictly speaking, a theory is a proposition. It offers a systematic explanation of a body of empirical data. In contrast, a model is merely an explanatory device; it is more like a hypothesis that has yet to be tested. In that sense, in politics, while theories can be said to be more or less 'true', models can only be said to be more or less 'useful'. Clearly, however, theories and models are

● **Theory**: A systematic explanation of empirical data, usually (unlike a hypothesis) presented as reliable knowledge.

CONCEPT

Paradigm

A paradigm is, in a general sense, a pattern or model that highlights relevant features of a particular phenomenon. As used by Kuhn (1962), however, it refers to an intellectual framework comprising interrelated values, theories and assumptions, within which the search for knowledge is conducted. 'Normal' science is therefore conducted within the established paradigm, while 'revolutionary' science, attempts to replace an old paradigm with a new one. The radical implication of this theory is that 'truth' and 'falsehood' are only provisional judgements.

often interlinked: broad political theories may be explained in terms of a series of models. For example, the theory of pluralism (discussed in Chapters 4 and 5) encompasses a model of the state, a model of electoral competition, a model of group politics, and so on.

However, virtually all conceptual devices, theories and models contain hidden values or implicit assumptions. This is why it is difficult to construct theories that are purely empirical; values and normative beliefs invariably intrude. In the case of concepts, this is demonstrated by people's tendency to use terms as either 'hurrah! words' (for example 'democracy', 'freedom' and 'justice') or 'boo! words' (for example, 'conflict', 'anarchy', 'ideology', and even 'politics'). Models and theories are also 'loaded' in the sense that they contain a range of biases. It is difficult, for example, to accept the claim that rational-choice theories are value-neutral. As they are based on the assumption that human beings are basically egoistical and self-regarding, it is perhaps not surprising that they have often pointed to policy conclusions that are politically conservative. In the same way, class theories of politics, advanced by Marxists, are based on broader theories about history and society and, indeed, they ultimately rest on the validity of an entire social philosophy.

There is therefore a sense in which analytical devices, such as models and microtheories, are constructed on the basis of broader macrotheories. These major theoretical tools of political analysis are those that address the issues of power and the role of the state: pluralism (see p. 100), elitism (see p. 102), class analysis and so on. These theories are examined in Chapters 4 and 5. At a still deeper level, however, many of these macrotheories reflect the assumptions and beliefs of one or other of the major ideological traditions. These traditions operate in a similar way to the 'paradigms' to which Thomas Kuhn refers in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962). A paradigm is a related set of principles, doctrines and theories that helps to structure the process of intellectual enquiry. In effect, a paradigm constitutes the framework within which the search for knowledge is conducted. In economics, this can be seen in the replacement of Keynesianism by monetarism (and perhaps the subsequent shift back to neo-Keynesianism); in transport policy it is shown in the rise of green ideas.

According to Kuhn, the natural sciences are dominated at any time by a single paradigm; science develops through a series of 'revolutions' in which an old paradigm is replaced by a new one. Political and social enquiry is, however, different, in that it is a battleground of contending and competing paradigms. These paradigms take the form of broad social philosophies, usually called 'political ideologies': liberalism, conservatism, socialism, fascism, feminism and so on. Each presents its own account of social existence; each offers a particular view of the world. To portray these ideologies as theoretical paradigms is not, of course, to say that most, if not all, political analysis is narrowly ideological, in the sense that it advances the interests of a particular group or class. Rather, it merely acknowledges that political analysis is usually carried out on the basis of a particular ideological tradition. Much of academic political science, for example, has been constructed according to liberal–rationalist assumptions, and thus bears the imprint of its liberal heritage.

The various levels of conceptual analysis are shown diagrammatically in Figure 1.5.

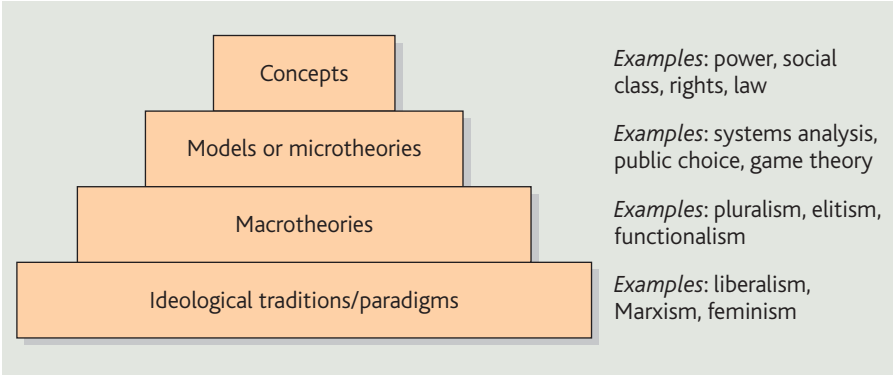


Figure 1.5 Levels of conceptual analysis

POLITICS IN A GLOBAL AGE

Beyond the domestic/international divide?

As an academic discipline, politics has conventionally focused on the state and particularly on its governmental apparatus: the institutional framework of the state, where power lies within it, how decisions are made, and so on. This state-based paradigm is one in which politics has a distinct spatial or territorial character. In short, borders and boundaries matter. This especially applies in the case of distinction between *domestic* politics, which is concerned with the state's role in maintaining order and carrying out regulation within its own borders, and *international* politics, which is concerned with relations between or among states. In that sense, sovereignty (see p. 58), the supreme or unquestionable authority of the state, is a 'hard shell' that divides the 'inside' of politics from the 'outside'. This domestic/international, or 'inside/outside', divide also separates what have been conventionally been seen as two quite different spheres of political interaction (see Figure 1.6). Whereas politics 'inside' has an orderly or regulated character, stemming from the ability of the state within the domestic sphere to impose rule from above, politics in the 'outside' has an anarchic character, derived from the fact that there is no authority in the international sphere higher than the sovereign state. The spatial division that the state-based paradigm has inculcated is, furthermore, reflected in a traditional sub-disciplinary division of labour between 'political science' and 'international relations', or IR. While political science has tended to view states as macro-level actors within the political world, IR has typically treated states as micro-level actors within the larger international arena.

The state-based paradigm of politics has nevertheless come under pressure as a result of recent trends and developments, not least those associated with globalization (see p. 142). In particular, there has been a substantial growth in cross-border, or **transnational**, flows and transactions – movements of people, goods, money, information and ideas. As state borders have become increasingly 'porous', the conventional domestic/international, or 'inside/outside', divide has become more difficult to sustain. This can be illustrated both by the substantially greater vulnerability of domestic economies to events that take place elsewhere

● **Transnational**: Configuration, which may apply to events, people, groups or organizations, that takes little or no account of national governments or state borders.

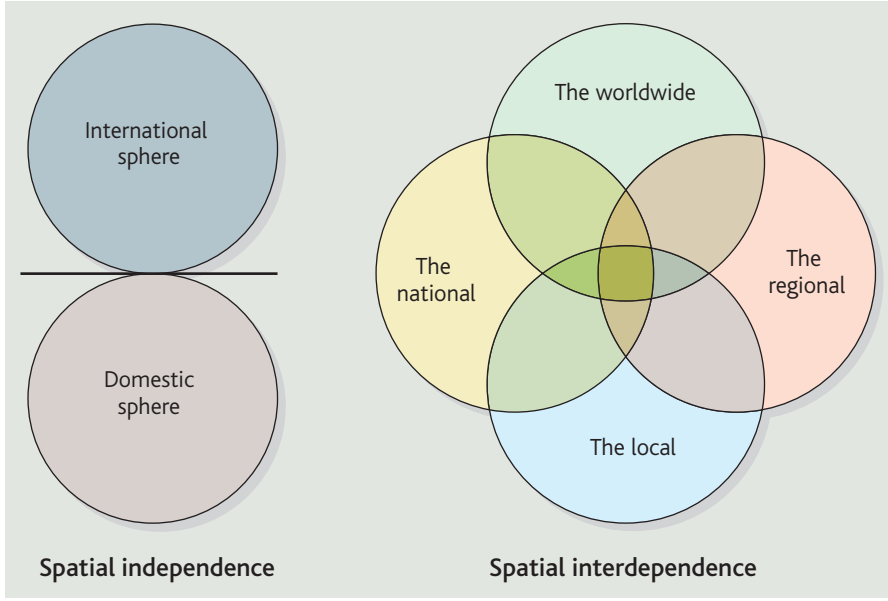


Figure 1.6 Contrasting models of spatial politics

in the world, as demonstrated by the wide-ranging impact of the 2007–09 global financial crisis, and by the wider use of digital technologies that enable people to communicate with each other through means such as mobile phones and the internet that national governments find very difficult to control. The increase in the scale, scope and, sometimes, nature of spatial interdependence has encouraged some to speculate that the disciplinary divide between political science and international relations should be dissolved (Hay, 2010). If political activity can no longer be seen to take place within discrete domestic and international spheres, politics is perhaps best understood in terms of overlaps and interrelationships between and amongst a number of spheres – the global, the regional, the national and the local (see Figure 1.6). Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to portray such an approach to politics as entirely novel, as the domestic/international divide has usually been treated more as a way of prioritizing a particular sphere and set of interactions, rather than as a rigid doctrine. For instance, liberal IR theorists have long argued that the constitutional structure of the state influences its external behaviour, while political scientists studying the causes of revolution have always accepted that war and invasion may sometimes be decisive factors in their outbreak.

Where does this leave us as far as political analysis is concerned? One of the implications of accepting that politics takes place not only in global, regional, national and local spheres, but also, crucially, through relationships between these various spheres, is that it so expands the parameters and complexity of politics that it becomes difficult, and maybe impossible, to make sense of it as a whole. This would require, for example, that we study topics such as elections, political parties, constitutions, assemblies and other aspects of national government alongside topics such as war and peace, nuclear proliferation, terrorism, poverty and development, international organizations and so forth. Moreover,

Focus on . . .

Politics and IR: two disciplines or one?

Are political science and international relations (IR) two separate disciplines, or should they be thought of as sub-fields, or different levels of analysis, within the same broad discipline: politics or political analysis? In most contexts, political science and IR emerged independently from one another. Political science was established as an academic discipline from the mid-nineteenth century onwards in the USA and across Europe, while IR developed in the aftermath of WWI, and was largely shaped by the desire to uncover the conditions for enduring peace (a concern about the policy relevance of its work that has never applied in the same way to political science). Politics and IR constitute separate fields of knowledge, in the sense that the former addresses 'domestic' issues and developments (concerned with what goes on *within* the state), while the latter addresses 'international' issues and developments (concerned with what occurs *between* states). Politics and IR have therefore developed their own analytical tools and theoretical perspectives, helping each to enjoy the same degree of disciplinary authenticity as, say, economics or sociology.

However, the disciplinary divide between politics and IR may always have been arbitrary. In this view, politics and IR can be seen not as discrete but as overlapping disciplines: they ask very similar questions, albeit about different (if always related) levels of political interaction. Both politics and IR are primarily concerned with questions about power (its distribution, exercise, consequences and so forth), and both place a strong emphasis on the nature, role and activities of the state, even if political science views the state as a macro-level actor, while IR views it as a micro-level actor. Questions about the balance between conflict and cooperation in social relations are also central to both disciplines. The idea of a disciplinary divide has become particularly problematic due to the advent of an increasingly interdependent world, in which 'the domestic' and 'the international' affect one another to a greater degree than ever before. Globalization, climate change, multi-level governance, security and crime are only some of the issues that confound the traditional domestic/international divide, and perhaps suggest that rigid disciplinary or sub-disciplinary fault lines should be dispensed with (Hay, 2002).

although the domestic/international divide has undoubtedly been compromised by globalizing trends, it is difficult to argue that it has been rendered entirely meaningless. Only so-called 'hyperglobalizers', who subscribe to the fanciful idea that politics – and, for that matter, everything else – has been caught up in a swirl of interconnectedness that effectively absorbs all of its parts into an indivisible, global whole, fail to acknowledge that states, though often transformed, continue to be the most significant actors in both the domestic and the international spheres. Sovereignty may no longer be a 'hard shell' that separates politics 'inside' from politics 'outside', but it remains at least a 'soft shell'. Although this book adopts a holistic approach, which accepts the implications of spatial interdependence and, particularly, that what goes on *within* states and what goes on *between* states impact on each other to a greater degree than ever before, it considers the interactions of politics from a primarily domestic perspective. In contrast, its companion volume, *Global Politics* (2011), examines the interactions of politics from a primarily international or global perspective, and so gives particular attention to ideas, issues and theories that have conventionally been studied within the field of international relations.

SUMMARY

- Politics is the activity through which people make, preserve and amend the general rules under which they live. As such, it is an essentially social activity, inextricably linked, on the one hand, to the existence of diversity and conflict, and, on the other, to a willingness to cooperate and act collectively. Politics is better seen as a search for conflict resolution than as its achievement, as not all conflicts are, or can be, resolved.
- Politics has been understood differently by different thinkers and within different traditions. Politics has been viewed as the art of government or as 'what concerns the state'; as the conduct and management of public affairs; as the resolution of conflict through debate and compromise; and as the production, distribution and use of resources in the course of social existence.
- There is considerable debate about the realm of 'the political'. Conventionally, politics has narrowly been seen as embracing institutions and actors operating in a 'public' sphere concerned with the collective organization of social existence. However, when politics is understood in terms of power-structured relationships, it may be seen to operate in the 'private' sphere as well.
- A variety of approaches has been adopted in the study of politics as an academic discipline. These include political philosophy, or the analysis of normative theory, and an empirical tradition particularly concerned with the study of institutions and structures, as well as behavioural analysis, rational-choice theory, so-called 'new' institutionalism and a variety of critical approaches.
- Concepts, models and theories are the tools of political analysis, providing the building blocks of knowledge. However, they are only analytical devices. Although they help to advance understanding, they are more rounded and coherent than the unshapely and complex realities they seek to describe. Ultimately, all political and social enquiry is conducted within a particular intellectual framework or ideological paradigm.
- A distinction has traditionally been drawn between the domestic and international realms of politics, reflecting differences between what happens within the state and what occurs in relations between states. This domestic/international divide has helped to sustain a disciplinary distinction between political science and international relations. However, globalization and the advent of an interdependent world has cast significant doubt upon the viability of these distinctions.

Questions for discussion

- If politics is essentially social, why is not all social activity political?
- Should politics be thought of as an arena or a process?
- Why has power so often been thought of as the defining feature of politics?
- On what grounds can politics be defended?
- Is politics inevitable? Could politics ever be brought to an end?
- How do mainstream and critical approaches to the study of politics differ?
- Why has the idea of a science of politics been so attractive?
- Is it possible to study politics objectively and without bias?
- Is the distinction between the domestic and international realms of politics any longer sustainable?

Further reading

Hay, C., (ed.), *New Directions in Political Science: Responding to the Challenge of an Independent World* (2010). A series of astute reflections on the nature, extent and implication of global interdependence for politics and a variety of political issues.

Leftwich, A. (ed.), *What is Politics? The Activity and Its Study* (2004). A very useful collection of essays examining different concepts of politics as well as contrasting views of the discipline.

Marsh, D. and G. Stoker (eds), *Theory and Methods in Political Science*, 3rd edn (2010). An accessible, yet comprehensive and sophisticated, exploration of the nature and scope of the discipline of political science.

Savigny, H. and L. Marsden, *Doing Political Science and International Relations: Theories in Action* (2011). An introduction to political science that uses case studies to examine a wide range of theories and approaches.