Chapter 1

Introduction: Concepts and Theories in Politics

Introduction

It would be misleading, indeed patently foolish, to suggest that political conflict reflects nothing more than confusion in the use of language. It is certainly true that enemies often argue, fight and even go to war, both claiming to be 'defending liberty', 'upholding democracy' or that 'justice is on our side'. The intervention of some Great Lexicographer descending from the skies to demand that the parties to the dispute define their terms before they proceed, stating precisely what each means by 'liberty', 'democracy' and 'justice', would surely be to no avail. The argument, fight or war would take place anyway. Politics, in other words, can never be reduced to mere semantics. And yet there is also a sense in which sloppiness in the use of language helps to protect ignorance and preserve misunderstanding.

Language is both a tool with which we think and a means by which we communicate with others. If the language we use is confused or poorly understood, it is not only difficult to express our views and opinions with any degree of accuracy but it is also impossible to know the contents of our own minds. This book sets out to clarify and examine the major concepts and theories used in political analysis and, in so doing, to provide an introduction to some of the most recurrent controversies in political thought. This introduction attempts to explain why this task is so difficult. Can a neutral and scientific vocabulary ever be devised for politics, and, if not, where does this leave us? Why are political concepts so often the subject of intellectual and ideological controversy? How have recent developments in political theory cast doubt on the very idea of objective truth?

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Language and politics

Whatever else politics might be it is a social activity. It is therefore conducted through the medium of language, whether written in books, pamphlets and manifestos, daubed on placards and walls, or spoken in meetings, shouted at rallies or chanted on demonstrations and marches. At first sight, language is a simple thing: it is a system of expression which employs symbols, in this case *words*, to represent *things*, which can include physical objects, feelings, ideas and so forth. This implies that language is essentially passive, its role being to reflect reality as accurately as possible, rather as a mirror reflects the image before it. However, language is also a positive and active force, capable of firing the imagination and stirring the emotions. Words do not merely reflect the realities around us, they also help to shape what we see and structure our attitude towards it. In effect, language helps to create the world itself.

This problem is particularly acute in politics because language is so often wielded by those who have an incentive to manipulate and confuse – professional politicians. Being primarily interested in political advocacy, politicians are typically less concerned with the precision of their language than they are with its propaganda value. Language is therefore not simply a means of communication, it is a political weapon; it is shaped and honed to convey political intent. States justify their own 'nuclear deterrent' but condemn other states for possessing 'weapons of mass destruction'. The invasion of a foreign country can be described either as a 'violation' of its sovereignty or as the 'liberation' of its people. Similarly, civilian casualties of war can be dismissed as 'collateral damage', and genocide can appear almost excusable when it is referred to as 'ethnic cleansing'. The language used by politicians sometimes threatens to turn euphemism into an art form, at times approaching the bizarre extremes of 'Newspeak', the language of the Ministry of Truth in George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, which declares that War is Peace, Freedom is Slavery and Ignorance is Strength.

Particular controversy has been raised since the late twentieth century by the movement to insist upon 'political correctness' in the use of language, often referred to simply as PC. Under pressure from feminist and civil rights movements, attempts have been made to purge language of racist, sexist and other derogatory or disparaging implications. According to this view, language invariably reflects the power structure in society at large, and so discriminates in favour of dominant groups and against subordinate ones. Obvious examples of this are the use of 'Man' or 'mankind' to refer to the human race, references to ethnic minorities as 'negroes' or 'coloureds', and the description of third world states as 'underdeveloped'. The goal of 'political correctness' is to develop bias-free terminology that

enables political argument to be conducted in non-discriminatory language, thereby countering deeply rooted prejudices and presuppositions. The difficulty with such a position is, however, that the hope of an unbiased and objective language of political discourse may be illusory. At best, 'negative' terms and images can be replaced by 'positive' ones; for example, the 'disabled' can be referred to as the 'differently abled', and states can be described as 'developing' rather than as 'underdeveloped' (although even this implies that they lag behind 'developed' countries). Critics of 'political correctness' furthermore argue that it imposes an ideological straitjacket upon language that both impoverishes its descriptive power and introduces a form of censorship by denying expression to 'incorrect' views.

If the attempt to devise a neutral and scientific vocabulary for politics is hopeless, where does this leave us? The least, and possibly the most, we can do is be clear about the words we use and the meanings we assign to them. The goal is the one George Orwell outlined in his seminal essay 'Politics and the English Language' (1957): language should be 'an instrument for expressing and not for concealing or preventing thought'. When a stupid remark is uttered its stupidity should be obvious, even to the speaker. However, this requires more than just a series of definitions. A definition ties a word down to a precise meaning, something that is difficult to do with political terms because they stand for ideas, concepts and values which are themselves highly complex and often fiercely contested. Moreover, most political terms carry heavy ideological baggage, a set of assumptions and beliefs which serve to influence how the words are used and what meanings are assigned to them. Finally, there is the danger of forgetting what Samuel Johnson warned: 'that words are the daughters of earth, and that things are the sons of heaven'. In other words, language always has a limited value. However carefully words are used and however rigorously their meanings are refined, language tends to simplify and misrepresent the infinite complexity of the real world. If we mistake the 'word' for the 'thing' we are in danger, as the Zen saying puts it, of mistaking the finger pointing at the moon for the moon itself.

Understanding political concepts

This book examines political theory by exploring the use and significance of key political concepts, clustered into related groups. However, concepts are often slippery customers, and this is particularly the case in relation to political concepts. In its simplest sense, 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 general concept 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 mice', and so on. 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. Concepts are therefore 'general' in the sense that they can refer to a number of objects, indeed to any object that complies with the general idea itself.

Concept formation is an essential step in the process of reasoning. 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 upon it, and we do this through the construction of concepts. Quite simply, to treat a cat as a cat, we must first have a concept of what it is. Precisely the same applies to the process of political reasoning: we build up our knowledge of the political world not simply by looking at it, but by developing and refining concepts which help us make sense of it. Concepts, in that sense, are the building blocks of human knowledge.

The first problem encountered with political concepts is that they are often, and some would argue always, difficult to disentangle from the moral, philosophical and ideological views of those who advance them. This is explicitly acknowledged in the case of prescriptive or normative concepts, usually categorized as 'values'. Values refer to moral principles or ideals, that which *should*, *ought* or *must* be brought about. Examples of political values include 'justice', 'liberty', 'human rights', 'equality' and 'toleration'. By contrast, another range of concepts, usually termed descriptive or positive concepts, are supposedly more securely anchored in that they refer to 'facts' which have an objective and demonstrable existence: they refer to what *is*. Concepts such as 'power', 'authority', 'order' and 'law' are categorized in this sense as descriptive rather than normative. As facts can be proved to be either true or false, descriptive concepts are often portrayed as 'neutral' or value-free. However, in politics, facts and values are invariably interlinked, and even apparently descriptive concepts tend to be 'loaded' with moral and ideological implications. This can be seen, for instance, in the case of 'authority'. If authority is defined as 'the right to influence the behaviour of others', it is certainly possible to use the concept descriptively to say who possesses authority and who does not, and to examine the basis upon which it is exercised. Nevertheless, it is impossible completely to divorce the concept from value judgements about when, how and why authority *should* be exercised. In short, no one is neutral about authority. For example,

whereas conservatives, who emphasize the importance of order and discipline, tend to regard authority as rightful and healthy, anarchists, who believe all systems of rule to be intrinsically undesirable, reject authority as nakedly oppressive.

A second problem is that political concepts often become the subject of intellectual and ideological controversy. It is not uncommon, as pointed out earlier, for political argument to take place between people who claim to uphold the *same* principle or ideal. This is reflected in attempts to establish a particular conception of a concept as objectively correct, as in the case of 'true' democracy, 'true' freedom, 'true' justice and so forth. A way out of this dilemma was suggested by W.B. Gallie (1955–6), who suggested that in the case of concepts such as 'power', 'justice' and 'freedom' controversy runs so deep that no neutral or settled definition can ever be developed. These concepts should be recognized, he argued, as 'essentially contested concepts'. In effect, each term encompasses a number of rival concepts, none of which can be accepted as its 'true' meaning. To acknowledge that a concept is 'essentially contested' is not, however, to abandon the attempt to understand it, but rather to recognize that competing versions of the concept may be equally valid. This view has, however, been subject to two forms of criticism (Ball, 1988). First, many theorists who attempt to apply Gallie's insights (as, for example, Lukes (1974) in relation to 'power') continue to defend their preferred interpretation of a concept against its rivals. This refusal to accept that all versions of the concept are equally valid produces on-going debate and argument which could, at some stage in the future, lead to the emergence of a single, agreed concept. Second, certain concepts are now contested which were once the subject of widespread agreement. For instance, the wide-ranging and deep disagreement that currently surrounds 'democracy' only emerged from the late eighteenth century onwards alongside new forms of ideological thinking. As a result, it is perhaps better to treat contested concepts as 'currently' contested (Birch, 1993) or as 'contingently' contested (Ball, 1997).

The final problem with political concepts is what may be called the fetishism of concepts. This occurs when concepts are treated as though they have a concrete existence separate from, and, in some senses, holding sway over, the human beings who use them. In short, words are treated as things, rather than as devices for understanding things. The German sociologist, Max Weber (1864–1920), attempted to deal with this problem by classifying particular concepts as 'ideal types'. An ideal 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 are thus explanatory tools, not approximations of reality; they neither 'exhaust reality' nor do they offer an ethical ideal.

Concepts such as 'democracy', 'human rights' and capitalism' are thus more rounded and coherent than the unshapely realities they seek to describe. Weber himself treated 'authority' and 'bureaucracy' as ideal types. The importance of recognizing particular concepts as ideal types is that it underlines the fact that concepts are only analytical tools. For this reason, it is better to think of concepts or ideal types not as being 'true' or 'false', but merely as more or less 'useful'.

Further attempts to emphasize the contingent nature of political concepts have been undertaken by theorists who subscribe to postmodernism. They have attacked the 'traditional' search for universal values acceptable to everyone on the grounds that this assumes that there is a moral and rational high point from which all values and claims to knowledge can be judged. The fact that fundamental disagreement persists about the location of this high point suggests that there is a plurality of legitimate ethical and political positions, and that our language and political concepts are valid only in terms of the context in which they are generated and employed. In its extreme version, as, for example, advanced in the 'deconstructive' writings of the French philosopher Jacques Derrida (see p. 8), it is an illusion to believe that language, and therefore concepts, can in any sense be said to 'fit' the world. All we can do, from this perspective, is to recognize how reality is constructed by and for us though our language; as Derrida put it, 'there is nothing outside the text'. The problem with such a view is not only that it, in effect, undermines itself (this conceptual system, like all conceptual systems, must be false), but also that it results in an epistemological relativism that portrays the quest for truth as essentially hopeless. Science, like all other modes of thought or academic disciplines, is just another 'discourse' (that is, a language which structures understanding and behaviour and in the process, augments power).

What is political theory?

The study of politics is usually seen to encompass two, and some would say three, distinct subdivisions. On the one hand, there is what is called political science and, on the other, political theory and political philosophy – terms that are often used interchangeably but between which distinctions are sometimes drawn. Although political science was a child of the twentieth century, it drew upon roots which dated back to the empiricism of the seventeenth century. 'Science' refers to a means of acquiring knowledge through observation, experimentation and measurement. Its central feature, the 'scientific method', involves verifying or falsifying hypotheses by testing them against empirical evidence, preferably using

Postmodernism

Postmodernism is a controversial and confusing term that was first used to describe experimental movements in Western architecture and cultural development in general. Postmodern thought originated principally in continental Europe, especially France, and constitutes a challenge to the type of academic political theory that has come to be the norm in the Anglo-American world. Since the 1970s, however, postmodern and poststructural political theories have become increasingly fashionable. Their basis lies in a perceived social shift – from modernity to postmodernity – and a related cultural and intellectual shift – from modernism to postmodernism. Modern societies were seen to be structured by industrialization and class solidarity, social identity being largely determined by one's position within the productive system. Postmodern societies, on the other hand, are increasingly fragmented and pluralistic 'information' societies in which individuals are transformed from producers to consumers, and individualism replaces class, religious and ethnic loyalties. Postmodernity is thus linked to postindustrialism, the development of a society no longer dependent upon manufacturing industry, but more reliant upon knowledge and communication.

Modernism, the cultural form of modernity, stemmed largely from Enlightenment ideas and theories, and was expressed politically in ideological traditions that offered rival conceptions of the good life. Liberalism (see p. 29) and Marxism (see p. 82) are its clearest examples. Modernist thought is characterized by foundationalism – the belief that it is possible to establish objective truths and universal values, usually associated with a strong faith in progress. By contrast, the central theme of postmodernism is that there is no such thing as certainty: the idea of absolute and universal truth must be discarded as an arrogant pretence. Although by its nature postmodernism does not constitute a unified body of thought, its critical attitude to truth-claims stems from the assumption that all knowledge is partial and local, a view it shares with some communitarian thinkers (see p. 35). Poststructuralism, a term sometimes used interchangeably with postmodernism, emphasizes that all ideas and concepts are expressed in language which itself is enmeshed in complex relations of power. Political theory, then, does not stand above power relations and bestow dispassionate understanding; it is an intrinsic part of the power relations it claims to analyse.

Postmodernist thought has been criticized from two angles. In the first place, it has been accused of relativism, in that it holds that different modes of knowing are equally valid and thus rejects the idea that even science is able reliably to distinguish between truth and falsehood. Secondly, it has been charged with conservatism, on the grounds that a non-foundationalist political stance offers no perspective from which the existing order may be criticized and no basis for the construction of an alternative social order. Nevertheless, the attraction of postmodern theory is its remorseless questioning of apparently solid realities and accepted beliefs. Its general emphasis upon discourse, debate and democracy reflects the fact that to reject hierarchies of ideas is also to reject any political and social hierarchies.

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Key figures

Friedrich Nietzsche (see p. 37) A German philosopher, Nietzsche is invariably regarded as the most important precursor of postmodernism. His work stresses the importance of will, especially the 'will to power', and emphasizes that people create their own world and make their own values. This is most memorably expressed in the assertion that 'God is dead'. Nietzsche's nihilism, the rejection of all moral and political principles, encouraged later postmodern theorists to regard truth as a fiction and to link beliefs and values to the assertion of power.

Martin Heidegger (1889–1976) A German philosopher, Heidegger, also a precursor of postmodernism, had a considerable impact upon the development of phenomenology and existentialism. Fundamental to his philosophical system was the question of the meaning of Being, by which he meant self-conscious existence. All previous political philosophies had made the mistake of starting out from a conception of human nature rather than recognizing the 'human essence' as a 'realm of disclosure'. This had led to the dominance of technology over human existence, from which, Heidegger believed, humans could escape by developing a more receptive relationship to Being. Heidegger's most famous work is *Being and Time* (1927).

Jean-François Lyotard (1924–) A French philosopher, Lyotard was primarily responsible for popularizing the term postmodern and for giving it its most succinct definition: 'An incredulity towards metanarratives.' By this he meant a scepticism about all creeds and ideologies that are based upon universal theories of history which view society as a coherent totality. This stems from science's loss of authority as it has fragmented into a number of forms of discourse and as 'performativity', or efficiency, has displaced truth as its standard of value. Lyotard's post-Marxism also reflects his belief that communism has been eliminated as an alternative to liberal capitalism. His most important work is *The Postmodern Condition* (1979).

Michel Foucault (see p. 129) A French philosopher, Foucault was primarily concerned with forms of knowledge and the construction of the human subject. His early work analysed different branches of knowledge as 'archaeologies', leading to an emphasis upon discourse, or 'discursive formation'. Central to this was his belief that knowledge is deeply enmeshed in power, truth always being a social construct, and that power can be productive as well as prohibitive.

Jacques Derrida (1930–) A French philosopher, Derrida is the main proponent of deconstruction, although it is a term he is reluctant to use. Deconstruction (sometimes used interchangeably with poststructuralism) is the task of raising questions about the 'texts' that constitute cultural life,

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exposing complications and contradictions of which their 'authors' are not fully conscious and for which they are not fully responsible. Derrida's concept of 'difference' rejects the idea that there are fixed differences in language and allows for a constant sliding between meanings in that there are no polar opposites. His major works include *Writing and Difference* (1967), *Margins of Philosophy* (1972) and *Spectres of Marx* (1993).

Richard Rorty (1931–) A US philosopher, Rorty has focused increasingly upon political issues, having established his reputation in the analysis of language and mind. His early work rejected the idea that there is an objective, transcendental standpoint from which beliefs can be judged, leading to the conclusion that philosophy itself should be understood as nothing more than a conversation. Nevertheless, he supports a pragmatic brand of liberalism that overlaps at times with social democracy, for which reason he has reservations about some of the relativist trends in postmodernism. Rorty's best-known works include *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979), *Consequences of Pragmatism* (1982) and *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (1989).

Further reading

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repeatable experiments. The almost unquestioned status which science has come to enjoy in the modern world is based upon its claim to be objective and value-free, and so to be the only reliable means of disclosing truth. Political science is therefore essentially empirical, claiming to describe, analyse and explain government and other political institutions in a rigorous and impartial manner. The high point of enthusiasm for a 'science of politics' came in the 1950s and 1960s with the emergence, most strongly in the USA, of a form of political analysis that drew heavily upon behaviouralism. Behaviouralism developed as a school of psychology (known as behaviourism) which, as the name implies, studies only the observable and measurable behaviour of human beings. This encouraged political analysts such as David Easton to believe that political science could adopt the methodology of the natural sciences, leading to a proliferation of studies in areas like voting behaviour where systematic and quantifiable data were readily available.

Political theory and political philosophy may overlap, but a difference of emphasis can nevertheless be identified. Anything from a plan to a piece of

abstract knowledge can be described as a 'theory'. In academic discourse, however, a theory is an explanatory proposition, an idea or set of ideas that in some way seeks to impose order or meaning upon phenomena. As such, all enquiry proceeds through the construction of theories, sometimes thought of as hypotheses – that is, explanatory propositions waiting to be tested. Political science, no less than the natural sciences and other social sciences, therefore has an important theoretical component. For example, theories, such as that social class is the principal determinant of voting behaviour, and that revolutions occur at times of rising expectations, are essential if sense is to be made of empirical evidence. This is what is called empirical political theory.

Political theory is, however, usually regarded as a distinctive approach to the subject, even though, particularly in the USA, it is seen as a subfield of political science. Political theory involves the analytical study of ideas and doctrines that have been central to political thought. Traditionally, this has taken the form of a history of political thought, focusing upon a collection of 'major' thinkers – for instance, from Plato to Marx – and a canon of 'classic' texts. As it studies the ends and means of political action, political theory is clearly concerned with ethical or normative questions, such as 'Why should I obey the state?', 'How should rewards be distributed?' and 'What should be the limits of individual liberty?'. This traditional approach has about it the character of literary analysis: it is primarily interested in examining what major thinkers said, how they developed or justified their views, and the intellectual context in which they worked. An alternative approach has been called formal political theory. This draws upon 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 Virginia School, formal political theory has attempted to understand better the behaviour of actors like voters, politicians, lobbyists and bureaucrats, and has spawned 'rational choice,' 'public choice' and 'social choice' schools of thought (see p. 246). Although its proponents believe it to be strictly neutral, its individualist and egoistical assumptions have led some to suggest that it has an inbuilt bias towards conservative values.

The term 'political philosophy' can be used loosely to cover any abstract thought about politics, law or society – philosophy being, in general terms, the search for wisdom and understanding. However, philosophy has also been seen more specifically as a *second-order* discipline, in contrast to *first-order* disciplines which deal with empirical subjects. In other words, philosophy is not so much concerned with revealing truth in the manner of science, as with asking secondary questions about how knowledge is acquired and about how understanding is expressed. For instance, whereas

a political scientist may examine the democratic processes at work within a particular system, a political philosopher will be interested in clarifying what is meant by 'democracy'. Political philosophy therefore addresses itself to two main tasks. First, it is concerned with the critical evaluation of political beliefs, paying attention to both inductive and deductive forms of reasoning. Secondly, it attempts to clarify and refine the concepts employed in political discourse. What this means is that, despite the best efforts of political philosophers to remain impartial and objective, they are inevitably concerned with justifying certain political viewpoints at the expense of others and with upholding a particular understanding of a concept rather than alternative ones. From this point of view, the present book can be seen primarily as a work of political theory and not political philosophy. Although the writings of political philosophers provide much of its material, its objective is to analyse and explain political ideas and concepts rather than advance any particular beliefs or interpretations.

Political theory in the twenty-first century

Political theory was in a beleaguered state through much of the twentieth century. Indeed, in his introduction to *Philosophy, Politics and Society* (1956) Peter Laslett famously declared that 'political philosophy is dead'. Its 'death' was largely a consequence of important shifts in philosophy, notably the rise of logical positivism. Logical positivism, originally advanced by a group of philosophers collectively known as the Vienna Circle, reflected a deep faith in scientific understanding and suggested that propositions that are not empirically verifiable are simply meaningless. Normative concepts such as 'liberty', 'equality', 'justice' and 'rights' were therefore discarded as nonsense, and philosophers, as a result, tended to lose interest in moral and political issues. For their part, political scientists, influenced by the 'behavioural revolution' that was one of the chief legacies of positivism, turned their backs upon the entire tradition of normative political thought. This meant, for instance, that words such as 'democracy' were redefined in terms of measurable political behaviour.

After the 1960s, however, political theory re-emerged with new vitality, and the previously sharp distinction between political science and political theory began to fade. This occurred for a number of reasons. These included a growing dissatisfaction with behaviouralism, based upon its tendency to constrain the scope of political analysis by preventing it from going beyond what is directly observable. Moreover, faith in the ability of science to uncover objective truth was undermined by advances in the philosophy of science, stemming in particular from the work of Thomas

Kuhn (1962), which emphasise that scientific knowledge is not absolute but is contingent upon the principles, doctrines and theories that structure the process of enquiry. Lastly, the emergence of new social movements in the 1960s and the end of consensus politics brought normative and ideological questions back to the forefront of political analysis, as reflected in the work of a new generation of political theorists, such as John Rawls (see p. 298) and Robert Nozick (see p. 318).

However, revived political theory differs in a number of respects from its earlier manifestations. The philosophical tradition in the study of politics had previously been thought of as an analysis, through the ages, of a number of perennial problems – most obviously, the nature of justice, the grounds of political obligation, the proper balance between liberty and equality, and so on. Political philosophy therefore considered the contribution of major thinkers to our understanding of such problems and analysed how this understanding had developed from the ancient and medieval periods, through the early modern period (1500–1800 approximately) to the modern period (since 1800). One feature of modern political theory is that it has placed a greater emphasis upon the role of history and culture in shaping political understanding. What, say, Plato, Rousseau and Marx wrote perhaps tells us more about the societies and historical circumstances in which they lived than it does about any supposedly timeless moral and political issues. The extent to which contemporary understanding can be advanced through a study of past political thinkers and traditions may therefore be extremely limited. While few would conclude from this that the study of 'major' thinkers and 'classic' texts is worthless, most now accept that any interpretation of such thinkers and texts must take account of context, and recognize that, to some extent, all interpretations are entangled with our own values and understanding.

The second development is that political theory has become increasingly diffuse and fragmented. In the modern period, Western political thought had acquired an unmistakably liberal character, to such an extent that liberalism (see p. 29) and political theory came to be virtually co-extensive. The major rivals to liberalism were Marxism (see p. 82), which gained substance from 'actually existing socialism', in the form of the Soviet Union and other communist states, and traditional conservatism. Indeed, by the second half of the twentieth century, it became fashionable for liberals to portray liberalism as a 'meta-ideology', in that it sought to establish a body of rules that laid down the grounds upon which political and moral debate could take place. As it was expressed by its proponents, liberalism gave priority to 'the right' (procedural rules that reflected, in particular, people's rights to freedom and autonomy) over 'the good' (how people should lead their lives). Key debates in political theory (for

example, between Rawls and Nozick over justice) were often debates *within* liberalism, rather than debates between liberal and non-liberal positions. However, since the 1960s, a range of rival political traditions have emerged as critiques of, or alternatives to, liberal theory. These have included radical feminism (see p. 62), which has questioned liberalism's ability to take account of gender differences and sexual inequality; communitarianism (see p. 35), which highlights the atomistic implications of liberal individualism; and multiculturalism (see p. 215), which portrays liberalism as a form of cultural imperialism and suggests that liberal and non-liberal values and traditions may be equally legitimate. Faced by such challenges, liberalism has gone into retreat. Not only has the 'traditional' search for universal values acceptable to everyone been effectively abandoned, but some theorists have questioned whether the pressures generated by diversity and pluralism can any longer be confined within a liberal framework.

Finally, conventional political theory has been shaken by the emergence of an 'anti-foundationalist' critique that challenges the rationalism that lies at its heart. From this perspective, political theory is a child of the Enlightenment, an eighteenth-century cultural movement that sought to release humankind from its bondage to superstition and ignorance by unleashing an 'age of reason'. The 'Enlightenment project', most clearly embodied in liberalism and its chief twentieth-century rival, Marxism, thus promised to bring light to darkness and to bring about progress through the accumulation of knowledge and wisdom.

Anti-foundationalists, usually but not necessarily associated with post-modernism, reject the idea that there is a moral and rational high point from which all values and claims to knowledge can be judged. The fact that fundamental disagreement persists about the location of this high point suggests that there is a plurality of legitimate ethical and political positions, and that our language and political concepts are valid only in terms of the context in which they are generated and employed. Richard Rorty (1989), for example, has questioned the idea of objective truth and has argued that political traditions, like all other belief systems, are merely 'vocabularies' that cannot be viewed as more 'accurate' than other vocabularies. John Gray (1995) has proclaimed that the enlightenment project is self-destroying, in that its tendency towards relentless critique cannot but be applied to its own foundations, leading to nihilism and, he warns, violence. The implication of anti-foundationalism is that political theory is not so much an accumulating body of knowledge, to which major thinkers and traditions have contributed; rather (in so far as it exists at all), it is a dialogue or conversation in which human beings share their differing viewpoints and understandings with one another.

Summary

1 Politics is, in part, a struggle over the legitimate meaning of terms and concepts. Language is often used as a political weapon; words are seldom neutral but carry political and ideological baggage. If a scientific vocabulary of politics is difficult to achieve, the least we can do is be clear about the words we use and the meanings we assign to them.

2 Concepts are the building blocks of knowledge. Concepts are sometimes abstract models or ideal-types, which only approximate to the reality they help to understand. They can either be descriptive, referring to 'what is', or normative, expressing views about 'what ought to be'. The meaning of political concepts is often contested; some of them may be 'essentially contested concepts', meaning that no neutral or settled definition can ever be developed.

3 When political analysis uses scientific methods of enquiry it draws a clear distinction between facts and values; seeking to disclose objective and reliable knowledge, it tends to turn away from normative theorising. While political theory involves the analytical study of ideas and concepts, both normative and descriptive, political philosophy attempts to refine our understanding of such ideas and concepts in the hope of advancing political wisdom.

4 Political theory confronts a number of problems and challenges as it enters the twenty-first century. Threatened in the mid twentieth century by positivism, which suggested that the entire tradition of normative political thought is meaningless, political theory revived after the 1960s. However, it has subsequently become increasingly diffuse and fragmented, as the status of liberalism has been challenged by the emergence of rival schools. More radically, anti-foundationists have attacked Enlightenment rationalism.

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