Chapter 3

Politics, Government and the State

Introduction

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

The debate about 'What is Politics?' exposes some of the deepest and most intractable conflicts in political thought. The attempt to define politics raises a series of difficult questions. For example, is politics a restricted activity, confined to what goes on within government or the state, or does it occur in all areas of social life? Does politics, in other words, take place within families, schools, colleges and in the workplace? Similarly, is politics, as many believe, a corrupting and dishonest activity, or is it, rather, a healthy and ennobling one? Can politics be brought to an end? Should politics be brought to an end? A further range of arguments and debates are associated with the institution of government. Is government necessary or can societies be stable and successful in the absence of government? What form should government take, and how does government relate to broader political processes, usually called the political system? Finally, deep controversy also surrounds the nature and role of the state. For instance, since the terms 'government' and 'state' are often used interchangeably, can a meaningful distinction be established between them? Is state power benevolent or oppressive: does it operate in the interests of all citizens or is it biased in favour of a narrow elite or ruling class? Moreover, what should the state do? Which responsibilities should we look to the state to fulfil and which ones should be left in the hands of private individuals?

Politics

There are almost as many definitions of politics as there are authorities willing to offer an opinion on the subject. Politics has been portrayed as the exercise of power or authority, as a process of collective decision-making, as the allocation of scarce resources, as an arena of deception or manipulation and so forth. A number of characteristic themes nevertheless crop up in most, if not all, these definitions. In the first place, politics is an activity. Although politics is also an academic subject, sometimes indicated by the use of 'Politics' with a capital letter P, it is clearly the study of the activity of 'politics'. Second, politics is a social activity; it arises out of interaction between or among people, and did not, for example, occur on Robinson Crusoe's island – though it certainly did once Man Friday appeared. Third, politics develops out of diversity, the existence of a range of opinions, wants, needs or interests. Fourth, this diversity is closely linked to the existence of conflict: politics involves the expression of differing opinions, competition between rival goals or a clash of irreconcilable interests. Where spontaneous agreement or natural harmony occurs, politics cannot be found. Finally, politics is about decisions, collective decisions which are in some way regarded as binding upon a group of people. It is through such decisions that conflict is resolved. However, politics is better thought of as the search for conflict-resolution rather than its achievement, since not all conflicts are, or can be, resolved.

However, this is where agreement ends. There are profound differences about when, how, where, and in relation to whom, this 'politics' takes place. For instance, which conflicts can be called 'political'? What forms of conflict-resolution can be described as 'political'? And where is this activity of 'politics' located? Three clearly distinct conceptions of politics can be identified. In the first place, politics has long been associated with the formal institutions of government and the activities which take place therein. Second, politics is commonly linked to public life and public activities, in contrast to what is thought of as private or personal. Third, politics has been related to the distribution of power, wealth and resources, something that takes place within all institutions and at every level of social existence.

The art of government

Bismarck declared that 'politics is not a science . . . but an art'. The art he had in mind was the art of government, the exercise of control within society through the making and enforcement of collective decisions. This is perhaps the classical definition of politics, having developed from the original meaning of the term in Ancient Greece. The word 'politics' is

derived from *polis*, which literally means city-state. Ancient Greek society was divided into a collection of independent city-states, each of which possessed its own system of government. The largest and most influential of these was Athens, often portrayed as the model of classical democracy. All male citizens were entitled to attend the Assembly or *Ecclesia*, very similar to a town-meeting, which met at least ten times a year, and most other public offices were filled by citizens selected on the basis of lot or rota. Nevertheless, Athenian society was based upon a rigidly hierarchical system which excluded the overwhelming majority – women, slaves and foreign residents – from political life.

In this light, politics can be understood to refer to the affairs of the *polis*; it literally means 'what concerns the *polis*'. The modern equivalent of this definition is 'what concerns the state'. This is a definition which academic political science has undoubtedly helped to perpetuate through its traditional focus upon the personnel and machinery of government. Furthermore, it is how the term 'politics' is commonly used in everyday language. For example, a person is said to be 'in politics' when they hold a public office, or to be 'entering politics' when they seek to do so. Such a definition of 'the political' links it very closely to the exercise of authority, the right of a person or institution to make decisions on behalf of the community. This was made clear in the writings of the influential American political scientist, David Easton (1981), who defined politics as the 'authoritative allocation of values'. Politics has therefore come to be associated with 'policy', formal or authoritative decisions that establish a plan of action for the community. Moreover, it takes place within a 'polity', a system of social organisation centred upon the machinery of government. It should be noted, however, that this definition is highly restrictive. Politics, in this sense, is confined to governmental institutions: it takes place in cabinet rooms, legislative chambers, government departments and the like, and it is engaged in by limited and specific groups of people, notably politicians, civil servants and lobbyists. Most people, most institutions and most social activities can thus be regarded as 'outside' politics.

For some commentators, however, politics refers not simply to the making of authoritative decisions by government but rather to the particular means by which these decisions are made. Politics has often been portrayed as 'the art of the possible', as a means of resolving conflict by compromise, conciliation and negotiation. Such a view was advanced by Bernard Crick in *In Defence of Politics* ([1962] 2000), in which politics is seen as 'that solution to the problem of order which chooses conciliation rather than violence and coercion'. The conciliation of competing interests or groups requires that power is widely dispersed throughout society and apportioned according to the importance of each to the welfare and survival of the whole community. Politics is, then, no utopian solution,

but only the recognition that if human beings cannot solve problems by compromise and debate they will resort to brutality. As the essence of politics is discussion, Crick asserted that the enemy of politics is 'the desire for certainty at any cost', whether this comes in the form of a closed ideology, blind faith in democracy, rabid nationalism or the promise of science to disclose objective knowledge.

Once again, such a definition of politics can clearly be found in the common usage of the term. For instance, a 'political' solution to a problem implies negotiation and rational debate, in contrast to a 'military' solution. In this light, the use of violence, force or intimidation can be seen as 'non-political', indeed as the breakdown of the political process itself. At heart, the definition of politics as compromise and conciliation has an essentially liberal character. In the first place, it reflects a deep faith in human reason and in the efficacy of debate and discussion. Second, it is based upon an underlying belief in consensus rather than conflict, evident in the assumption that disagreements can be settled without resort to naked power. In effect, there are no irreconcilable conflicts.

The link between politics and the affairs of the state has, however, also generated deeply negative conceptions of what politics is about. For many, politics is quite simply a 'dirty' word. It implies deception, dishonesty and even corruption. Such an image of politics stems from the association

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.

Machiavelli's major work, *The Prince*, written in 1513 and published in 1531, was intended to provide guidance for the ruler of a future united Italy, and drew heavily upon his first-hand observations of the statecraft of Cesare Borgia and the power politics that dominated his period. His 'scientific method' portrayed politics in strictly realistic terms and highlighted the use by the political leaders of cunning, cruelty and manipulation. This emphasis, and attacks upon him that led to his excommunication, meant that the term 'Machiavellian' subsequently came to mean scheming and duplicitous. His *Discourses*, written in 1513–17 and published in 1531, provides a fuller account of Machiavelli's republicanism, but commentators have disagreed about whether it should be considered as an elaboration of or a departure from the ideas outlined in *The Prince*.

between politics and the behaviour of politicians, sometimes said to be rooted in the writings of Niccolò Machiavelli. In *The Prince* ([1531] 1961), Machiavelli attempted to develop a strictly realistic account of politics in terms of the pursuit and exercise of power, drawing upon his observations of Cesare Borgia. Because he drew attention to the use by political leaders of cunning, cruelty and manipulation, the adjective 'Machiavellian' has come to stand for underhand and deceitful behaviour.

Politicians themselves are typically held in low esteem because they are perceived to be power-seeking hypocrites who conceal personal ambition behind the rhetoric of public service and ideological conviction. A conception of politics has thus taken root which associates it with self-seeking, two-faced and unprincipled behaviour, clearly evident in the use of derogatory phrases like 'office politics' and 'politicking'. Such an image of politics also has a liberal character. Liberals have long warned that, since individuals are self-interested, the possession of political power will be corrupting in itself, encouraging those 'in power' to exploit their position for personal advantage and at the expense of others. This is clearly reflected in the British historian Lord Acton's (1834–1902) famous aphorism: 'power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.'

Public affairs

In the first conception, politics is seen as a highly restricted activity, confined to the formal exercise of authority within the machinery of government. A second and broader conception of politics moves it beyond the narrow realm of government to what is typically 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 is thought of as a private sphere. Such a view of politics is rooted in the work of the famous Greek philosopher, Aristotle (see p. 69). In *Politics* (1958), 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'. Politics is therefore the 'master science'; it is an ethical activity concerned ultimately with creating a 'just society'. According to this view, politics goes on within 'public' bodies such as government itself, political parties, trade unions, community groups and so on, but does not take place within the 'private' domain of, say, the home, family life and personal relationships. However, it is sometimes difficult in practice to establish where the line between 'public' life and 'private' life should be drawn, and to explain why it should be maintained.

The traditional distinction between the public realm and the private realm conforms to the division between the state and society. The characteristics of the state are discussed in more detail in the final section of this chapter, but for the time being the state can be defined as a political association which exercises sovereign power within a defined territorial area. In everyday language, the state is often taken to refer to a cluster of institutions, centring upon the apparatus of government but including the courts, the police, the army, nationalized industries, the social security system and so forth. These institutions can be regarded as 'public' in the sense that they are responsible for the collective organisation of community life and are thus funded at the public's expense, out of taxation. By contrast, society consists of a collection of autonomous groups and associations, embracing family and kinship groups, private businesses, trade unions, clubs, community groups and the like. Such institutions 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' dichotomy, politics is restricted to the activities of the state itself and the responsibilities which are properly exercised by public bodies. Those areas of life in which individuals can and do manage for themselves – economic, social, domestic, personal, cultural, artistic and so forth – are therefore clearly 'non-political'.

However, the 'public/private' divide is sometimes used to express a further and more subtle distinction, namely, between 'the political' and 'the personal'. Although society can be distinguished from the state, it nevertheless contains a range of institutions that may be thought of as 'public' in the wider sense that they are open institutions, operating in public and to which the public has access. This encouraged Hegel (see p. 59), for example, to use the more specific term, 'civil society', to refer to an intermediate socio-economic realm, distinct from the state on one hand and the family on the other. By comparison with domestic life, private businesses and trade unions can therefore be seen to have a public character. From this point of view, politics as a public activity stops only when it infringes upon 'personal' affairs and institutions. For this reason, while many people are prepared to accept that a form of politics takes place in the workplace, they may be offended and even threatened by the idea that politics intrudes into family, domestic and personal life.

The importance of the distinction between political and private life has been underlined by both conservative and liberal thinkers. Conservatives such as Michael Oakeshott (see p. 139) have, for instance, insisted that politics be regarded as a strictly limited activity. Politics may be necessary for the maintenance of public order and so on, but it should be restricted to its proper function: the regulation of public life. In *Rationalism in Politics* ([1962] 1991), Oakeshott advanced an essentially non-political view of

human nature, emphasizing that, far from being Aristotle's 'political animals', most people are security-seeking, cautious and dependent creatures. From this perspective, the inner core of human existence is a 'private' world of family, home, domesticity and personal relationships. Oakeshott therefore regarded the rough-and-tumble of political life as inhospitable, even intimidating.

From a liberal viewpoint, the maintenance of the 'public/private' distinction is vital to the preservation of individual liberty, typically understood as a form of privacy or non-interference. If politics is regarded as an essentially 'public' activity, centred upon the state, it will always have a coercive character: the state has the power to compel the obedience of its citizens. On the other hand, 'private' life is a realm of choice, freedom and individual responsibility. Liberals therefore have a clear preference for society rather than the state, for the 'private' rather than the 'public', and have thus feared the encroachment of politics upon the rights and liberties of the individual. Such a view is commonly expressed in the demand that politics be 'kept out of' private activities or institutions, matters that can, and should, be left to individuals themselves. For example, the call that politics be 'kept out of' sport implies that sport is an entirely 'private' affair over which the state and other 'public' bodies exercise no rightful responsibility. Indeed, such arguments invariably portray 'politics' in a particularly unfavourable light. In this case, for example, politics represents unwanted and unwarranted interference in an arena supposedly characterized by fair competition, personal development and the pursuit of excellence.

Not all political thinkers, however, have had such a clear preference for society over the state, or wished so dearly to keep politics at bay. There is, for instance, a tradition which portrays politics favourably precisely because it is a 'public' activity. Dating back to Aristotle, this tradition has been kept alive in the twentieth century by writers such as Hannah Arendt (see p. 58). In her major philosophical work *The Human Condition* (1958) Arendt placed 'action' above both 'labour' and 'work' in what she saw as a hierarchy of worldly activities. She argued that politics is the most important form of human activity because it involves interaction among free and equal citizens, and so both gives meaning to life and affirms the uniqueness of each individual. Advocates of participatory democracy have also portrayed politics as a moral, healthy and even noble activity. In the view of the eighteenth-century French thinker, Jean-Jacques Rousseau (see p. 242), political participation was the very stuff of freedom itself. Only through the direct and continuous participation of all citizens in political life can the state be bound to the common good, or what Rousseau called the 'general will'. John Stuart Mill (see p. 256) took up the cause of political participation in the nineteenth century, arguing that involvement

Hannah Arendt (1906–75)

German political theorist and philosopher. Arendt was brought up in a middle-class Jewish family. She fled Germany in 1933 to escape from Nazism, and finally settled in the United States, where her major work was produced.

Arendt's wide-ranging, even idiosyncratic, writing was influenced by the existentialism of Heidegger (see p. 8) and Jaspers (1883–1969); she described it as 'thinking without barriers'. In *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), which attempted to examine the nature of both Nazism and Stalinism, she developed a critique of modern mass society, pointing out the link between its tendency to alienation and atomization, caused by the breakdown of traditional norms, and the rise of totalitarian movements. Her most important philosophical work, *The Human Condition* (1958), develops Aristotle (see p. 69) in arguing that political action is the central part of a proper human life. She portrayed the public sphere as the realm in which freedom and autonomy are expressed, and meaning is given to private endeavours. She analysed the American and French revolutions in *On Revolution* (1963), arguing that each had abandoned the 'lost treasure' of the revolutionary tradition, the former by leaving the mass of citizens outside the political arena, the latter by its concentration on the 'social question' rather than freedom. In *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1963), Arendt used the fate of the Nazi war criminal Adolf Eichmann as a basis for discussing the 'banality of evil'.

in 'public' affairs is educational in that it promotes the personal, moral and intellectual development of the individual. Rather than seeing politics as a dishonest and corrupting activity, such a view presents politics as a form of public service, benefiting practitioners and recipients alike.

A further optimistic conception of politics stems from a preference for the state rather than for civil society. Whereas liberals have regarded 'private' life as a realm of harmony and freedom, socialists have often seen it as a system of injustice and inequality. Socialists have consequently argued for an extension of the state's responsibilities in order to rectify the defects of civil society, seeing 'politics' as the solution to economic injustice. From a different perspective, Hegel portrayed the state as an ethical idea, morally superior to civil society. In *Philosophy of Right* ([1821] 1942), the state is regarded with uncritical reverence as a realm of altruism and mutual sympathy, whereas civil society is thought to be dominated by narrow self-interest. The most extreme form of such an argument is found in the fascist doctrine of the 'totalitarian state', expressed in Gentile's formula, 'Everything for the state, nothing against the state, nothing outside the state'. The fascist ideal of the absorption of

Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831)

German philosopher. Hegel was the founder of modern idealism and developed the notion that consciousness and material objects are in fact unified. In *Phenomenology of Spirit* ([1807] 1977), he sought to develop a rational system that would substitute for traditional Christianity by interpreting the entire process of human history, and indeed the universe itself, in terms of the progress of absolute Mind towards self-realisation. In his view, history is, in essence, a march of the human spirit towards a determinant end-point.

Hegel's principal political work, *Philosophy of Right* ([1821] 1942), advanced an organic theory of the state that portrayed it as the highest expression of human freedom. He identified three 'moments' of social existence: the family, civil society and the state. Within the family, he argued, a 'particular altruism' operates, encouraging people to set aside their own interests for the good of their relatives. He viewed civil society as a sphere of 'universal egoism' in which individuals place their own interests before those of others. However, he held that the state is an ethical community underpinned by mutual sympathy, and is thus characterised by 'universal altruism'. This stance was reflected in Hegel's admiration for the Prussian state of his day, and helped to convert liberal thinkers to the cause of state intervention. Hegel's philosophy also had considerable impact upon Marx (see p. 371) and other so-called 'young Hegelians'.

the individual into the community, obliterating any trace of individual identity, could be achieved only through the 'politicization' of every aspect of social existence, literally the abolition of 'the private'.

Power and resources

Each of the earlier two conceptions of politics view it as intrinsically related to a particular set of institutions or social sphere, in the first place the machinery of government and, second, the arena of public life. By contrast, the third and most radical definition of politics regards it as a distinctive form of social activity, but one that pervades every corner of human existence. As Adrian Leftwich insists in *What is Politics?* (1984): 'politics is at the heart of *all* collective social activity, formal and informal, public and private, in *all* human groups, institutions and societies'. In the view of the German political and legal theorist Carl Schmitt (1888–1985), politics reflects an immutable reality of human existence: the distinction between friend and enemy. In most accounts, this notion of 'the political' is linked to the production, distribution and use of resources in the course of

social existence. Politics thus arises out of the existence of scarcity, out of the simple fact that while human needs and desires are infinite, the resources available to satisfy them are always limited. Politics therefore comprises any form of activity through which conflict about resource-allocation takes place. This implies, for instance, that politics is no longer confined, as Crick argued, to rational debate and peaceful conciliation, but can also encompass threats, intimidation and violence. This is summed up in Clausewitz's famous dictum, 'War is nothing more than the continuation of politics by other means'. In essence, politics is power, the ability to achieve a desired outcome, through whatever means. Harold Lasswell neatly summed up this aspect of politics in the title of his book *Politics: Who Gets What, When, How?* (1936). Such a conception of politics has been advanced by a variety of theorists, amongst the most influential of whom have been Marxists and modern feminists.

The Marxist concept of politics operates on two levels. On the first, Marx (see p. 371) used the term 'politics' in a conventional sense to refer to the apparatus of the state. This is what he and Engels meant in *The Communist Manifesto* ([1848] 1976) when they referred to political power as 'merely the organised power of one class for oppressing another'. In Marx's view, politics, together with law and culture, was part of a 'superstructure', distinct from the economic 'base', which was the real foundation of social life. However, he did not see the economic 'base' and the political and legal 'superstructure' as discrete entities, but believed that the 'superstructure' arose out of, and reflected, the economic 'base'. At a deeper level, in other words, political power is rooted in the class system; as Lenin (see p. 83) put it, 'politics is the most concentrated expression of economics'. Far from believing that politics can be confined to the state and a narrow public sphere, Marxists may be said to hold that 'the economic is political'. Indeed, civil society, based as it is on a system of class antagonism, is the very heart of politics. However, Marx did not think that politics was an inevitable feature of social existence and he looked towards what he clearly hoped would be an end of politics. This would occur, he anticipated, once a classless, communist society came into existence, leaving no scope for class conflict, and therefore no scope for politics.

Particularly intense interest in the nature of politics has been expressed by modern feminist thinkers. Whereas nineteenth-century feminists accepted an essentially liberal conception of politics as 'public' affairs, and focused especially upon the campaign for female suffrage, radical feminists have been concerned to extend the boundaries of 'the political'. They argue that conventional definitions of politics, in effect, exclude women. Women have traditionally been confined to a 'private' existence, centred upon the family and domestic responsibilities; men, by contrast, have always

dominated conventional politics and other areas of 'public' life. Radical feminists have therefore attacked the 'public/private' dichotomy, proclaiming instead the slogan 'the personal is the political'. Although this slogan has provoked considerable controversy and a variety of interpretations, it undoubtedly encapsulates the belief that what goes on in domestic, family and personal life is intensely political. Behind this, however, stands a more radical notion of politics, defined by Kate Millett in *Sexual Politics* ([1970] 1990) as 'power-structured relationships, arrangements whereby one group of persons is controlled by another'. Politics therefore takes place whenever and wherever power and other resources are unequally distributed. From this viewpoint, it is possible to talk about 'the politics of everyday life', suggesting that relationships within the family, between husbands and wives or between parents and children, are every bit as political as relationships between employers and workers, or between government and its citizens. Such a broadening of the realm of politics has, on the other hand, deeply alarmed liberal theorists, who fear that it will encourage public authority to encroach upon the privacy and liberties of the individual.

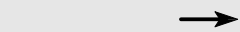
However, if politics is conceived as the allocation of scarce resources, it takes place not so much within a particular set of institutions as on a number of levels. The lowest level of political activity is personal, family and domestic life, where it is conducted through regular or continuous face-to-face interaction. Politics, for example, occurs when two friends decide to go out for the evening but cannot agree about where they should go, or what they should do. The second level of politics is the community level, typically addressing local issues or disputes but moving away from the face-to-face interaction of personal politics to some form of representation. This will certainly include the activities of community, local or regional government, which in countries as large as the USA may well encompass two or more distinct levels of government. It also, however, includes the workplace, public institutions and business corporations, within which only a limited range of decisions are made by direct face-to-face discussions. The third level of politics is the national level, focusing upon the institutions of the nation-state and the activities of major political parties and pressure groups. This is the level to which conventional notions of politics are largely confined. Finally, there is the international or supranational level of politics. This is concerned, quite obviously, with cultural, economic and diplomatic relationships between and amongst nation-states, but also includes the activities of supranational bodies, such as the United Nations and the European Union, multinational companies, NGOs and even international terrorists. Politics, in this view, is everywhere; indeed, given the widespread potential for power-related conflict, politics may come to be seen as coextensive with social existence itself.

Feminism

Feminism is characterised primarily by its political stance: the attempt to advance the social role of women. Feminists have highlighted what they see as a political relationship between the sexes, the supremacy of men and the subjection of women in most, if not all, societies. The 'first wave' of feminism was closely associated with the women's suffrage movement, which emerged in the 1840s and 1850s. The achievement of female suffrage in most Western countries in the early twentieth century meant that the campaign for legal and civil rights assumed a lower profile and deprived the women's movement of a unifying cause. The 'second wave' of feminism arose during the 1960s and expressed, in addition to the established concern with equal rights, the more radical and sometimes revolutionary demands of the growing Women's Liberation Movement. Although feminist politics has fragmented and undergone a process of de-radicalisation since the early 1970s, feminism has nevertheless gained growing respectability as a distinctive school of political theory.

Feminist political thought has primarily been concerned with two issues. First, it analyses the institutions, processes and practices through which women have been subordinated to men; and second, it explores the most appropriate and effective ways in which this subordination can be challenged. Feminist thought has rejected the conventional view that politics is confined to narrowly public activities and institutions, the most famous slogan of second-wave feminism being 'The personal is the political.' The central concept in the feminist theory of sexual politics is patriarchy, a term that draws attention to the totality of oppression and exploitation to which women are subject. This, in turn, highlights the political importance of gender, understood to refer to socially imposed rather than biological differences between men and women. Most feminists view gender as a political construct, usually based upon stereotypes of 'feminine' and 'masculine' behaviour and social roles.

Nevertheless, feminist theory and practice is highly diverse. The earliest feminist ideas derived largely from liberalism (see p. 29), and reflected a commitment to individualism and formal equality. In contrast, socialist feminism, largely derived from Marxism (see p. 82), has highlighted links between female subordination and the capitalist mode of production, drawing attention to the economic significance of women being confined to the family or domestic life. On the other hand, radical feminists moved beyond the perspectives of existing political traditions. They portray gender divisions as the most fundamental and politically significant cleavages in society, and call for the radical restructuring of personal, domestic and family life. However, the breakdown of feminism into three traditions – liberal, socialist and radical feminism – has become increasingly redundant since the 1970s as feminist thought has become yet more sophisticated and diverse. Among its more recent forms have been black feminism, psychoanalytic feminism, ecofeminism (see p. 193) and postmodern feminism (see p. 7).



The major strength of feminist political theory is that it provides a perspective on political understanding that is uncontaminated by the gender biases that pervade conventional thought. Feminism has not merely reinterpreted the contribution of major theorists and shed new light upon established concepts such as power, domination and equality, but also introduced a new sensitivity and language into political theory related to ideas such as connection, voice and difference. Feminism has nevertheless been criticized on the grounds that its internal divisions are now so sharp that feminist theory has lost all coherence and unity. Postmodern feminists, for example, even questioned whether 'woman' is a meaningful category. Others suggest that feminist theory has become disengaged from a society that is increasingly post-feminist, in that, largely thanks to feminism, the domestic, professional and public roles of women, at least in developed societies, have undergone a major transformation.

Key figures

Mary Wollstonecraft (see p. 000) Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792) is usually regarded as the first text of modern feminism and was written against the backdrop of the French Revolution, many years before the emergence of the women's suffrage movement. In arguing that women should be entitled to the same rights and privileges as men on the grounds that they are 'human beings', she established what was to become the core principle of liberal feminism.

Simone de Beauvoir (1906–86) A French novelist, playwright and social critic, Beauvoir helped to reopen the issue of gender politics and foreshadowed some of the themes later developed in radical feminism. She highlighted the extent to which the masculine is represented as the positive or the norm, while the feminine is portrayed as 'other'. Such 'otherness' fundamentally limits women's freedom and prevents them from expressing their full humanity. Beauvoir placed her faith in rationality and critical analysis as the means of exposing this process and giving women responsibility for their own lives. Her key feminist work is *The Second Sex* (1949).

Kate Millett (1934–) A US writer and sculptor, Millett developed radical feminism into a systematic theory that clearly stood apart from established liberal and socialist traditions. She portrays patriarchy as a 'social constant' running through all political, social and economic structures, and grounded in a process of conditioning that operates largely through the family, 'patriarchy's chief institution'. She supports consciousness-raising as a means of challenging patriarchal oppression, and has advocated the abolition and replacement of the conventional family. Millett's major work is *Sexual Politics* (1970).

Juliet Mitchell (1940–) A New Zealand-born British writer, Mitchell is one of the most influential theorists of socialist feminism. She has adopted a modern Marxist perspective that allows for the interplay of economic, social, political and cultural forces in society, and has warned that, since patriarchy has cultural and ideological roots, it cannot be overthrown simply by replacing capitalism with socialism. Mitchell was also one of the first feminists to use psychoanalytical theory as a means of explaining sexual difference. Her major works included *Women's Estate* (1971), *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* (1974) and *Feminine Sexuality* (1985).

Shulamith Firestone (1945–) A Canadian author and political activist, Firestone developed a theory of radical feminism that adapted Marxism to the analysis to the role of women. She argues that sexual differences stem not from conditioning but from a 'natural division of labour' within the 'biological family'. Society is thus structured not through the process of production, but through the process of reproduction. Women can, then, achieve emancipation only if they transcend their biological natures and escape from the 'curse of Eve' by the use of modern technology such as test-tube babies and artificial wombs. Firestone's best known work is *The Dialectic of Sex* (1970).

Catherine A. MacKinnon (1946–) A US academic and political activist, MacKinnon has made a major contribution to feminist legal theory. In her view, law in a liberal state is one of the principal devices through which women's silence and subordination is maintained. In the absence of gender equality, the 'normal' status of women is inevitably defined through the application of male values and practices. She has also argued that female oppression is based in sexuality and that pornography is the root cause of that oppression. MacKinnon's major works include *Sexual Harassment and Working Women* (1979), *Towards a Feminist Theory of the State* (1989) and *Only Words* (1993).

Further reading

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Government

However politics is defined, government is undoubtedly central to it. To 'govern', in its broadest sense, is to rule or exercise control over others. The activity of government therefore involves the ability to make decisions and to ensure that they are carried out. In that sense, a form of government can be identified within most social institutions. For instance, in the family it is apparent in the control that parents exercise over children; in schools it operates through discipline and rules imposed by teachers; and in the workplace it is maintained by regulations drawn up by managers or employers. Government therefore exists whenever and wherever ordered rule occurs. However, the term 'government' is usually understood more narrowly to refer to formal and institutional processes by which rule is exercised at community, national and international levels. As such, government can be identified with a set of established and permanent institutions whose function is to maintain public order and undertake collective action.

The institutions of government are concerned with the making, implementation and interpretation of law, law being a set of enforceable rules that are binding upon society. All systems of government therefore encompass three functions: first, legislation or the making of laws; second, the execution or implementation of laws; and third, the interpretation of law, the adjudication of its meaning. In some systems of government these functions are carried out by separate institutions – the legislature, the executive and the judiciary – but in others they may all come under the responsibility of a single body, such as a 'ruling' party, or even a single individual, a dictator. In some cases, however, the executive branch of government alone is referred to as 'the Government', making government almost synonymous with 'the rulers' or 'the governors'. Government is thus identified more narrowly with a specific group of ministers or secretaries, operating under the leadership of a chief executive, usually a prime minister or president. This typically occurs in parliamentary systems, where it is common to refer to 'the Blair Government', 'the Schröder Government' or 'the Howard Government'.

A number of controversial issues, however, surround the concept of government. In the first place, although the need for some kind of government enjoys near-universal acceptance, there are those who argue that government of any kind is both oppressive and unnecessary. Moreover, government comes in such bewildering varieties that it is difficult to categorize or classify its different forms. Government, for instance, can be democratic or authoritarian, constitutional or dictatorial, centralized or fragmented and so forth. Finally, government cannot be understood in isolation, separate from the society over which it rules. Governments

operate within political systems, networks of relationships usually involving parties, elections, pressure groups and the media, through which government can both respond to popular pressures and exercise political control.

Why have government?

People in every part of the world recognize the concept of government and would, in the overwhelming majority of cases, be able to identify institutions in their society that constitute government. Furthermore, most people accept without question that government is necessary, assuming that without it orderly and civilized existence would be impossible. Although they may disagree about the organization of government and the role it should play, they are nevertheless convinced of the need for some kind of government. However, the widespread occurrence of government and its almost uncritical acceptance worldwide does not in itself prove that an ordered and just society can only exist through the agency of government. Indeed, one particular school of political thought is dedicated precisely to establishing that government is unnecessary, and to bringing about its abolition. This is anarchism, anarchy literally meaning 'without rule'.

The classic argument in favour of government is found in social-contract theories, first proposed by seventeenth-century philosophers like Thomas Hobbes (see p. 123) and John Locke (see p. 268). Social-contract theory, in fact, constitutes the basis of modern political thought. In *Leviathan* ([1651] 1968), Hobbes advanced the view that rational human beings should respect and obey their government because without it society would descend into a civil war 'of every man against every man'. Social-contract theorists develop their argument with reference to an assumed or hypothetical society without government, a so-called 'state of nature'. Hobbes graphically described life in the state of nature as being 'solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short'. In his view, human beings were essentially power-seeking and selfish creatures, who would, if unrestrained by law, seek to advance their own interests at the expense of fellow humans. Even the strongest would never be strong enough to live in security and without fear: the weak would unite against them before turning upon one another. Quite simply, without government to restrain selfish impulses, order and stability would be impossible. Hobbes suggested that, recognizing this, rational individuals would seek to escape from chaos and disorder by entering into an agreement with one another, a 'social contract', through which a system of government could be established.

Social-contract theorists see government as a necessary defence against evil and barbarity, based as they are upon an essentially pessimistic view of

human nature. An alternative tradition however exists, which portrays government as intrinsically benign, as a means of promoting good and not just of avoiding harm. This can be seen in the writings of Aristotle, whose philosophy had a profound effect upon medieval theologians such as St Thomas Aquinas (see p. 158). In 'The Treatise of Law', part of *Summa Theologiae* (1963), begun in 1265, Aquinas portrayed the state as 'the perfect community' and argued that the proper effect of law was to make its subjects good. He was clear, for instance, that government and law would be necessary for human beings even in the absence of original sin. This benign view of government as an instrument which enables people to cooperate for mutual benefit has been kept alive in modern politics by the social-democratic tradition.

In the anarchist view, however, government and all forms of political authority are not only evil but also unnecessary. Anarchists advanced this argument by turning social-contract theory on its head and offering a very different portrait of the state of nature. Social-contract theorists assume, to varying degrees, that if human beings are left to their own devices rivalry, competition and open conflict will be the inevitable result. Anarchists, on the other hand, hold a more optimistic conception of human nature, stressing the capacity for rational understanding, compassion and cooperation. As William Godwin (see p. 338), whose *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* ([1793] 1976) gave the first clear statement of anarchist principles, declared: 'Man is perfectible, or in other words susceptible of perpetual improvement'. In the state of nature a 'natural' order will therefore prevail, making a 'political' order quite unnecessary. Social harmony will spontaneously develop as individuals recognize that the common interests that bind them are stronger than the selfish interests that divide them, and when disagreements do occur they can be resolved peacefully through rational debate and discussion. Indeed, anarchists see government not as a safeguard against disorder, but as the cause of conflict, unrest and violence. By imposing rule from above, government represses freedom, breeding resentment and promoting inequality.

Anarchists have often supported their arguments by the use of historical examples, such as the medieval city-states revered by Peter Kropotkin (see p. 26) or the Russian peasant commune admired by Leo Tolstoy, in which social order was supposedly maintained by rational agreement and mutual sympathy. They have also looked to traditional societies in which order and stability reign despite the absence of what would normally be recognized as government. Clearly, it is impossible to generalize about the nature of traditional societies, some of which are hierarchic and repressive, quite unappealing to anarchists. Nevertheless, sociologists have also identified highly egalitarian societies, such as that of the Bushmen of the Kalahari, where differences appear to be resolved through informal

processes and personal contacts, without the need for any formal government machinery. The value of such examples, however, is that they highlight precisely why, far from dispensing with the need for organized rule, modern societies have become increasingly dependent upon government.

The difference between traditional communities like that of the Kalahari Bushmen and the urban and industrialized societies in which the world's population increasingly lives could not be more marked. Traditional societies solve the problem of maintaining order largely through the maintenance of traditions and customs, often rooted in religious belief. Social rituals, for instance, help to entrench a set of common values and pass on rules of conduct from one generation to the next. Tradition therefore serves to ensure consistent and predictable social behaviour and to maintain a clearly defined social structure. Such societies, moreover, are relatively small, enabling social intercourse to be conducted on a personal, face-to-face level. By contrast, modern societies are large, complex and highly differentiated. Industrial societies consist of sprawling urban communities containing many thousands of people and sometimes several million. As a result of the decline of religion, ritual and tradition, modern societies typically lack a unifying set of common values and cultural beliefs. Industrialization has also made economic life more complex and generated an increasingly fragmented social structure. In short, the hallmarks of modern society are size, diversity and conflict. The informal mechanisms that underpin social order among the Kalahari Bushmen either do not exist or could not cope with the strains generated by modern society. It is therefore not surprising that the anarchist dream of abolishing government has been frustrated. The clear trend during most of the twentieth century has in fact been in the opposite direction: government has been seen to be increasingly necessary. Although anarcho-capitalists such as Murray Rothbard (see p. 339) have tried to reverse the growth in government by demonstrating that complex economies can be entirely regulated by the market mechanism, few modern societies are not characterized by extensive government intervention in economic and social life.

Governments and governance

Although all governments have the objective of ensuring orderly rule, they do so in very different ways and have assumed a wide variety of institutional and political forms. Absolute monarchies of old are, for instance, often distinguished from modern forms of constitutional and democratic government. Similarly, during the cold war period it was

common for regimes to be classified as belonging to the First World, the Second World or the Third World. Political thinkers have attempted to establish such classifications with one of two purposes in mind. In the case of political philosophers, they have been anxious to evaluate forms of government on normative grounds in the hope of identifying the 'ideal' constitution. Modern political scientists, however, have attempted to develop a 'science of government' in order to study the activities of government in different countries without making value judgements about them. Ideological considerations, nevertheless, tend to intrude. An example of this is the use of the term 'democratic' to describe a particular system of government, a term that indicates general approval by suggesting that in such societies government is carried out both *by* and *for* the people.

One of the earliest attempts to classify forms of government was undertaken by Aristotle. In his view, governments can be categorized on the basis of 'Who rules?' and 'Who benefits from rule?'. Government can be placed in the hands of a single individual, a small group or the many. In each case, however, government can be conducted either in the selfish interests of the rulers or for the benefit of the entire community. As a result, Aristotle identified six forms of government. Tyranny, oligarchy and democracy are all, he suggested, debased or perverted forms of rule in

Aristotle (384–322 BCE)

Greek philosopher. Aristotle was a student of Plato and the 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.

Aristotle's twenty-two surviving treatises were compiled as lecture notes and range over logic, physics, metaphysics, astronomy, meteorology, biology, ethics and politics. His best known political work is *Politics* (1958), a comprehensive study of the nature of political life and the forms it might take. In describing politics as the 'master science', he emphasized that it is in the public not private domain that human beings strive for justice and live the 'good life'. Aristotle's taxomony of forms of government led him to prefer those that aim at the common good over those that benefit sectional interests, and to recommend a mixture of democracy and oligarchy, in the form of what he called polity. The communitarianism (see p. 35) of *Politics*, in which the citizen is portrayed as strictly part of the political community, is qualified by an insistence upon choice and autonomy in works such as *Nicomachean Ethics*. In the middle ages, Aristotle's work became the foundation of Islamic philosophy, and it was later incorporated into Christian theology.

which, respectively, a single person, a small group and the masses govern in their own interests and therefore at the expense of others. By contrast, monarchy, aristocracy and polity are to be preferred because the single individual, small group or the masses govern in the interests of all. Aristotle declared that tyranny is clearly the worst of all possible constitutions since it reduces all citizens to the status of slaves. Monarchy and aristocracy are, on the other hand, impractical because they are based upon a god-like willingness to place the good of the community before one's own interests. Aristotle accepted that polity, rule by the many in the interests of all, is the most practicable of constitutions, but feared that the masses might resent the wealth of the few and too easily come under the sway of a demagogue. He therefore advocated a 'mixed' constitution which would leave government in the hands of the 'middle classes', those who are neither rich nor poor.

Modern government, however, is far too complex to be classified simply on an Aristotelian basis. Moreover, the simplistic classification of regimes as First World, Second World and Third World has become impossible to sustain in the light of the political, ideological and economic changes that have occurred since the collapse of communism in the revolutions of 1989–91. What used to be called first world regimes are better categorised as 'liberal democracies'. Their heartland was the industrialized West – North America, Europe and Australasia – but they now exist in most parts of the world as a result of the 'waves of democratization' that occurred in the post-1945 and post-1989 periods.

Such systems of government are 'liberal' in the sense that they respect the principle of limited government; individual rights and liberties enjoy some form of protection from government. Limited government is typically upheld in three ways. In the first place, liberal democratic government is constitutional. A constitution defines the duties, responsibilities and functions of the various institutions of government and establishes the relationship between government and the individual. Second, government is limited by the fact that power is fragmented and dispersed throughout a number of institutions, creating internal tensions or 'checks and balances'. Third, government is limited by the existence of a vigorous and independent civil society, consisting of autonomous groups such as businesses, trade unions, pressure groups and so forth. Liberal democracies are 'democratic' in the sense that government rests upon the consent of the governed. This implies a form of representative democracy in which the right to exercise government power is gained by success in regular and competitive elections. Typically, such systems possess universal adult suffrage and secret-ballot elections, and respect a range of democratic rights such as freedom of expression, freedom of assembly and freedom of movement. The cornerstone of liberal democratic government is political

pluralism, the existence of a variety of political creeds, ideologies or philosophies and of open competition for power amongst a number of parties. The democratic credentials of such a system are examined in greater depth in Chapter 8.

There is, however, a number of differences among liberal democratic systems of government. Some of them, like the USA and France, are republics, whose heads of state are elected, while countries such as the UK and the Netherlands are constitutional monarchies. Most liberal democracies have a parliamentary system of government in which legislative and executive power is fused. In countries such as the UK, Germany, India and Australia, the government is both drawn from the legislature and accountable to it, in the sense that it can be removed by an adverse vote. The USA, on the other hand, is the classic example of a presidential system of government, based as it is upon a strict separation of powers between the legislature and the executive. President and Congress are separately elected and each possesses a range of constitutional powers, enabling it to check the other. Some liberal democracies possess majoritarian governments. These occur when a single party, either because of its electoral support or the nature of the electoral system, is able to form a government on its own. Typically, majoritarian democracies possess two-party systems in which power alternates between two major parties, as has traditionally occurred, for instance, in the USA, the UK and New Zealand. In continental Europe, on the other hand, coalition government has been the norm, the focal point of which is a continual process of bargaining among the parties that share government power and the interests they represent.

In the aftermath of the collapse of communism, and with the steady emergence of competitive and electoral processes at least in the newly industrialized states of the developing world, 'end of ideology' theorists such as Francis Fukuyama (1992) proclaimed that government throughout the world was being irresistibly remodelled on liberal-democratic lines. However, despite the advance of democratization since the 1980s, a number of alternatives to the Western liberal model of government can be identified. These include postcommunist government, East Asian government, Islamic government and military government. Postcommunist government has generally assumed an outwardly liberal-democratic form, with the adoption of multi-party elections and the introduction of market-based economic reforms. Nevertheless, to varying degrees, government in postcommunist states is distinguished by factors such as the absence or weakness of a civic culture that emphasizes participation, bargaining and consensus; instabilities arising from the transition from central planning to some form of market capitalism; and the general weakness of state power, particularly reflected in the re-emergence of ethnic and nationalist tensions or the rise of organized crime.