

B.A. (Hons.) Political Science

Semester-I

Core Course

Paper-I : Understanding Political Theory



SCHOOL OF OPEN LEARNING
University of Delhi

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WHAT IS POLITICS

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After reading this lesson you will be familiar with:

- **What is politics? .**
- **The different conceptual approaches on viewing politics.**

Politics is the most important activity of organized life in society. If one tries to argue that on a macro basis life without social or political thought is than one wrong.

Why and in what manner people behave in their economic and political activities, should be systematically studied. That is what the study of politics seeks to do and political behaviour is almost entirely linked to economic and social behaviour and interests and vice-versa.

Nowadays young people often pompously declare: “I am not interested in politics”. To them politics is some disreputable art of manipulating one’s way into positions of state power for personal and party gains. And they don’t look forward to being called a “politician” ever in their working lives. In fact the word has almost gradually become a term of abuse.

As far as the concept of politics is really concerned this is a most naive and dumb notion. ***Actually we are all politicians.*** In everything we say or do, we are taking a position that is actually a political position whether we like it or not. For politics concerns everything in life. What and whether you will be educated, what and whether you will get a job, how much money you need to pay your bills and run your life and that of your family, how much money you can or should earn and from it how much you need to and should surrender in taxes to the state etc are all political questions. Should your education and preparation in life be the same as of everybody else or should some people other than you have more or less opportunities than you have? . Even whether what you call your private property is or should be strictly your own or is or should be owned ultimately by the whole of society and the nation and what rights you can or should have to dispose off your property as you like are political questions. In other words one’s level of individual and collective freedom, equality vis-à-vis others, justice, rights and duties are all part of the realm of politics.

You are not living in a ‘no man’s land’ or in the middle of the ocean or on some planet in outer space. You always exist within and under the jurisdiction of a state that has it’s own set of laws, rules and policies with it’s own bias. So when you take the stance, as many do, that you are only following the rules of the game and trying to live your life, that is also a political position because that only means you have by your actions (by default) accepted the *status quo* whatever it is. If you are advantaged in society relative to others then you have accepted that deal (probably happily) and don’t want to touch politics for

things are fine with you. If you are not advantaged on the other hand or you are exploited or are otherwise getting a bad deal you have still accepted the state of affairs as they are without trying to change your lot. So when you say you want to keep away from politics and do nothing, you are actually taking a political position in favour of the system as it is. If you do decide to do something then of course you are in politics in one form or the other. Even if you don't you still are in politics because you are helping the *status quo* to prevail and be as it is by accepting it and working under it.

Frankly therefore whatever you do or you don't is political one way or the other whether you like it or not.

So you might as well start thinking and pondering politics systematically. How about starting out by looking at how mankind has been thinking on politics conceptually from earliest times to the present day. Then maybe you can decide for yourself what you think politics is or more accurately what *your politics* is or should be? .

The route that the evolution of human thought took was substantially determined by history. The political structures of the times often egged on the growth of some streams of thought in political philosophy.

Generally politics has always been about state and government at it's most basic and has involved the study of formal political institutions such as parliament, executive, judiciary and the bureaucracy etc. Politics is thus a science and art of government and the basic political relationships: between state and individual and between states.

The Greek View

In fact the word politics itself has its origin in the Greek word *polis*, which means the community or populace or society. Greek thinkers like Plato and Aristotle saw politics as everything that is concerned with 'the general issues affecting the whole community'. According to the Greek view the participation of each and every citizen in the life of the community is necessary for the *self-realization* of each human being. In fact Aristotle argued he who did not live in a polis is to be considered 'either a God or a beast'. He also commented that basically *man is a political animal*. It has to be remembered that Greeks were organised into small city states or communities where each and every male was a citizen and attended parliament styled meetings for deciding the affairs of the community and so the distinctions that we make nowadays between what is private for an individual and what is public in his necessary relationships with the state and government organs were not quite what they are today. So much of the Greek view has to be seen as emanating from those circumstances and sociological realities. Thus in the Greek view all behaviour of a citizen was his political stance and nothing was private. The Greeks also stressed that the purpose of politics is to enable men to live together in a community and also to lead a high moral life. Or in other words the aim of Politics was also to foster the adoption and following of ethical goals leading to spiritual self-realization. Thus the

Greek concept of politics included the study of man, society, state and ethics and the subject was treated as a combination of religious and moral philosophy, metaphysics, a course for civic training of citizens and a guide to power.

The View of Politics as Study of the State

With the decline of city-states of the Greek sort and the rise of large empires, beginning with the Roman empire, the notion of politics inevitably began to be more and more linked to the state. The idea of the state became accepted as the principal mode of human organisation and developed with the rise of nation states particularly since the close of the middle ages. Hence subjects like international law also became a part of part of politics. The state, it became accepted would have monopoly of coercive power and the right to enforce obedience using police and military force. The state in practice meant the government because whatever was done in the name of the state was done by the government and hence the study of government organs like and institutions became a part of the study of politics. Also different forms of government like monarchy, aristocracy, democracy, federalism also became a part of the study of the state. In the twentieth century, the effect of public opinion, political parties and bureaucracy on government institutions were also included. Works like *Modern Democracies (1909)* by Herman Finer represented this trend.

Politics as a Dimension of the Social Process

It was realised over time that politics as a study of the state and institutions of the state like the government bodies does not go deep enough into various aspects of the political life of a citizen. The ordinary citizen and his political life is an interaction between him and the society and polity of which he is a part. To understand politics therefore one has to understand the whole social process and phenomenon.

To study politic as a social science and as a dimension of the social phenomenon and social process however leads to divergent views. Different schools of thought view the social process differently. Many people and thinkers at different times in history have propounded on the social process of politics but the main schools of thought that have made an impact are as follows: (a) The Liberal View (b) The Marxist View, (c) The Common Good View and (d) The Study of Power View.

(a) The Liberal View - Politics as a Conciliation of Interests

The Liberal view evolved over time in Western Europe in the writings of thinkers like Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, Adam Smith, Bentham, J.S. Mill T.H. Green, Laski, Barker, MacIver, J.B.D. Miller, Bernard Crick, Maurice Duverger etc. The main thrust of this view is that man is a selfish self-interested being and in the pursuit of his selfish goals is likely to clash and collide with other men resulting in disorder, indiscipline and chaos. Politics is a part of the social process to manage and provide conciliation in such

conflicts and thus for providing law and order, protection and security which according to the liberal view constitutes the fundamentals of justice.

The liberal view as has been mentioned evolved over time. The early liberal view was that only the *individual human being* with his self-interest, enterprise, desire for richness and happiness and reason can be the foundation of a stable society. Thinkers like Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, Adam Smith etc not just saw man as a selfish, egotistic being concerned only with his own self-preservation and not a social or moral being, they even argued, this was all for the best, because when everybody tries to promote his own selfish interest, the utility or happiness of society as a whole, is maximised.

In the 20th Century (after the major competitive school of thought of Marxist thinking had already made its appearance) the liberal view changed and thinkers like Bentley, Truman, G.D.H Cole, Laski, MacIver etc suggested that society is not just composed of self-interested individuals but also of interest groups that can be along the lines of social, religious, cultural commercial, economic and political through which man fulfils his interests and needs. However, like individuals, the groups themselves are also based upon self-interest and competition. The groups and aggregate of groups are constantly in competition and this competition is for the good of a free society and this competition should be allowed but it should be seen that it does not lead to violence and chaos.

In the liberal view therefore fundamentally the individual is the real social entity and the society is artificial. Hobbes for instance called society like a sack of corn with the corns being the individuals who pursue their own interests. Bentham called society the creation of a social contract between individuals who are after individual ends. MacPehrson termed this concept of society the 'free market society', a meeting place of self-interested individuals, a society based upon free will, competition and contract.

In this process however, liberalism acknowledges there are likely conflicts of various kinds like between individuals, between group, between different economic classes, between groups along lines of economic, geographic, cultural or ethnic etc. Liberalism basically believes as has been mentioned above that the role of society is to mediate in these disputes but later liberal writers like Green emphasised the social nature of man and the need to get everybody to cooperate. Max Weber and Karl Mannheim also stressed on the need for cooperation and in fact argued that for competition to benefit some cooperation is essential without which chaos and violence would be the likely result.

Further it is important to see politics, the liberal view argued as the principal way of reconciling conflicts in the process of competition and foster the essential cooperation. Without the political process in the meeting place that is society there would an inevitable breakdown of law and order. There is no harmony in society automatically without the political process. The early liberal wanted free competition between individuals to prevail with society only stepping in to set the rules of the game. But starting with the early twentieth century, liberals veered to the view that if individuals, groups, classes are left

free to compete for advantage, one section or class may accumulate greater portion of wealth, services, profit, or power. Hence, they defined politics as an activity to create conditions of greater equality, social justice, as a process of resolving conflicts without destroying the underlying competitive framework. This view is available in J.D.B. Miller's *The Nature of Politics* (1965), Bernard Crick's *In Defence of Politics* (1962), and Adrain Leftwich's *What is Politics*(1984). Bernard Crick for instance defines politics as 'an activity by which different interests within a given unit of rule are conciliated by giving them a share in power in proportion to their importance to the welfare and survival of the whole community'. The conflicts that arise when personal are a part of the realm of ethics but when public are a part of politics. The new liberals argued to renounce politics is to destroy the very thing which gives order to the pluralism and variety of civilised society, to enjoy variety without suffering either anarchy or the tyranny of a single truth. Crick further commented: 'political rule arises because of the problem of diversity and does not try to reduce all things to a single unity.....Politics is a way of ruling divided societies without undue violence - and most societies are divided'.

If the liberal view is accepted that politics is a process of finding conciliation, then the next question is how exactly this is to be achieved. The main ways of achieving harmony are (a) laws, (b) political institutions, (c) social welfare, (d) cultural traditions etc. Traditionally laws have been relied upon the most by liberal societies. In fact in liberal cultures there is a constant boasting of the *rule of law*. The fear of punishment is what is supposed to ensure compliance and deter breaking of laws. Over time there are many other methods that have evolved to great efficacy like universal suffrage, electoral democracy, political parties, non-governmental organisations, trade unions etc that fosters individual and mass participation in society.

It has to be understood clearly that on questions of economic systems, liberalism is for free market capitalism and private property unhindered and uncontrolled. The later liberals particularly Laski were for a welfare state where government does play an important role economically but on the whole liberals are for a model led and dominated by private business with only the least participation of the government in the economy.

(b) The Marxist View - Politics as Class Struggle

Karl Heinrich Marx (1818-1883) was an immensely influential philosopher of German Jewish origin, a political economist, and a socialist revolutionary. While Marx addressed a wide range of issues, he is most famous for his analysis of political history in terms of class struggles, summed up in the opening line of the introduction to the Communist Manifesto: "The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles."

Marxian philosophy propounds a different view of human nature that hinges on Marx's view of human nature. According to Marxian thought "existence precedes consciousness" and who a person is, is determined by where and when he is — social context takes precedence over innate behavior; or, in other words, one of the main features of human

nature is adaptability. Nevertheless, Marxist thought rests on the fundamental assumption that it is human nature to transform nature. For Marx, this is a natural capacity for a physical activity, but it is intimately tied to the active role of human consciousness. He comments:

'A spider conducts operations that resemble those of a weaver, and a bee puts to shame many an architect in the construction of her cells. But what distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is this, that the architect raises his structure in imagination before he erects it in reality. (Capital, Vol. I, Chap. 7, Pt. 1)

Marx did not believe that all people worked the same way, or that how one works is entirely personal and individual. Instead, he argued that work is a social activity and that the conditions and forms under and through which people work are socially determined and change over time. Marx's analysis of history is based on the distinction between the *means of production*, such as land, natural resources, and technology, that are necessary for the production of material goods, and the relationships in the process of production, in other words, the social and technical relationships people enter into. Together these two (means and labour relationships) comprise the mode of production. Marx observed that within any given society the mode of production changes, and that European societies had progressed from a feudal mode of production to a capitalist mode of production. In general, Marx believed that the means of production change more rapidly than the relations of production (for example, we develop a new technology, such as the Internet, and only later do we develop laws to regulate that technology). For Marx this mismatch between (economic) base and (social) superstructure is a major source of social disruption and conflict.

By "social relations of production" Marx meant not only relations among individuals, but also between or among groups of people, or classes. He defined classes in terms of objective criteria, such as their access to resources. For Marx, different classes have divergent interests, which is a source of social disruption and conflict. Marx proposed that history should be studied in terms of such conflicts.

Marx argued that the capitalist system of production leads to alienation of human work and gradually results in commodity-fication of labour. This he argued is the defining feature of capitalism. Prior to capitalism, markets existed in Europe where producers and merchants bought and sold commodities but according to Marx, a capitalist mode of production developed in Europe when labour itself became a commodity — when peasants became free to sell their own labour-power, and needed to do so because they no longer possessed their own land. People sell their labour-power when they accept compensation in return for whatever work they do in a given period of time (in other words, they are not selling the product of their labour, but their capacity to work). In return for selling their labour power they receive money, which allows them to survive. Those who must sell their labour power to survive he called "proletarians." The person who buys this labour power, generally someone who does own the land and technology

to produce, is a "capitalist" or "bourgeoisie" and the proletarians outnumber the capitalists.

Marx distinguished industrial capitalists from merchant capitalists. Merchants buy goods in one market and sell them in another. Since the laws of supply and demand operate within markets, there is often a difference between the price of a commodity in one market and another market. Merchants, then, practice arbitrage, and hope to capture the difference between these two markets by buying in the market where prices are lower and then selling it in the market prices are higher. Marx explained, industrial capitalists, on the other hand, take advantage of the difference between the labourer's wage and the market price for whatever commodity is produced by them. Marx observed that in a viable industry, input unit-costs are lower than output unit-prices enabling a profit. Marx called this difference "surplus value" and argued that this surplus value had its source in surplus labour, the difference between what it costs to keep workers alive and what they can produce.

The capitalist mode of production initially creates tremendous growth because the capitalist can, and has an incentive to, reinvest profits in new technologies and constantly revolutionized the means of production. But capitalism, Marx predicted is prone to periodic crises. He suggested that over time, capitalists would invest more and more in new technologies, and less and less in labour. Since Marx believed that surplus value appropriated from labour is the source of profits, he concluded that the rate of profit would fall even as the economy grew. When the rate of profit falls below a certain point, the result would be a recession or depression in which certain sectors of the economy would collapse. During such a crisis the price of labour would also fall, and eventually make possible the investment in new technologies and the growth of new sectors of the economy. Marx believed that this cycle of growth, collapse, and growth would be punctuated by increasingly severe crises. Over the long-term the consequence of this process was necessarily the enrichment and empowerment of the capitalist class and the impoverishment of the proletariat. So he argued the proletariat needs to seize the means of production to ensure social relations that would benefit everyone equally, and a system of production less vulnerable to periodic crises. This is the reason his view is regarded as revolutionary.

So Marxian view of politics is based on the fundamental social relationship between the rich and poorer work classes and his theory cum prediction that capitalism leads to a progressive loss of power and pauperisation of the poorer working classes or the proletariat who then ultimately are forced to politically react in a violent manner leading to a revolution. Thus politics is an expression of the fundamental class conflict leading to class struggle for overthrowing the control over society, economy, state and even religion by the upper classes who control modes of production.

(c) The Common Good View - Politics as Common Good

There is a way of looking at politics, which views the purpose of politics to be the pursuit of the common good. The problem of course is no two people can most of the time agree on what constitutes the common good.

It is suggested that when individuals live together in a society their common life creates common interests which constitutes the common good. And the pursuit of these common interests is the job of politics. The idea of politics as common good is very old. Plato and Aristotle in the Greek city-states, the political theologians of the middle ages, the utilitarian philosophers like Bentham and Mills, Karl Marx and socialists, the positive liberals like Green and Laski in relatively recent times and even the thoughts of Gandhi in India all fundamentally propose a notion of politics for the common good. But of course they have differed on what constitutes common good.

The Greek notion of Common Good

Plato viewed politics as a process through which men debate matters concerning the whole populace and take decisions to realize the common public good. Aristotle saw common good as an objective thing for man for it existed in nature. He said: "The end of *polis* is not mere life, it was rather good life. *Polis* came into existence for the sake of bare means of life but it continues its existence for the sake of good life....If all communities aim at some good, the political community which is the highest of all and which embraces the rest, aims in a higher degree than any other at the highest good. The individual is for the state. The task of politics is to decide the Good'. Plato called 'Justice' as man's highest good and the task of politics he argued is the dispensation of justice. He further said the common good is realised by each man sticking to his station in life. Interestingly that meant slaves should serve their masters without complaining. So the essence of the common good according to Plato lay in for instance in that the good of the slave in serving the master and the good of the master lay in serving the *polis*.

The Liberal view of Common Good

Within Liberalism the notion of common good changed from the early to the later positive. The early liberals were fanatical in their belief that all that was needed for achieving the common good was for each individual to pursue his own happiness in his own way so long as it did not interfere with the happiness of others. In this he needs to have the total freedom to do as he pleases with only societal institutions like courts and a constitution existing only to solve disputes and fights. They invented the concept of *utility maximisation* to explain their theory. Later liberals took a positive and constructive view of the common good and suggested it was not enough for each individual to blindly seek his own selfish interest in a state of free competition. That way the common good would never be realised. T.H. Green who is believed to have provided the ethical foundation to liberalism, argued that the individual is a social being and he comes to

acquire his capacities by being a part of the larger social whole. For a free, rational and moral life one has to live in accordance with the common good which may or may not be the individual's good. It is only this wider common good defined in a more real and benevolent sense which provides the context for rights. He suggested the common good is served when the external conditions prevailing within in a society provide the conditions for the internal development of man. This can be achieved not just by making provisions for rights, liberty and justice but also by such things like providing public education and health care, factory and minimum wage legislation, food adulterations laws etc. For the sake of the common good meant in this sense the state needs to intervene and regulate the economy and even should stand in the way of free competition if necessary. The liberal thinker R.H. Tawney even went to the extent of suggesting that common good is served by proper distribution of resources and regulation of the economy for social purpose. Thus they supported the idea of a welfare state rather than a free market economy.

The Communitarian View of Common Good

In the middle of the last century there was a certain revival of classical liberalism also referred to as neo-liberalism, which advocated values away from those of the positive liberalism of the early decades of the twentieth century. Partly as a reaction to this there arose a revival of the idea of the state as a political community in the 1980s and 1990s. This school of thought is known as Communitarianism. The most important thinkers of this school have been writers like Charles Taylor, Michael Sandal, Walzer etc. The communitarian view advocates the necessity of attending to the community along with individual liberty and equality because they feel that the value of the community is not sufficiently recognised in the individualistic liberal theories of politics. Usually the community already exists in the form of social practices, cultural traditions and shared social understandings. It is important to take the reality of existence of this community into account and protect it. Unlike free-for-all Liberalism or revolutionary rebuild-it-all Marxism, in contrast Communitarianism asks that what already exists be valued and protected and within it the common good be identified and promoted without an obsession for individual political and economic freedom. In fact the communitarians suggest the rights of the individual should be replaced with the 'politics of common good' and common good should mean that which is in conformity with the natural way of life of the community. The Common Good should conform to the three tests: (a) it should help build a cultural structure that is determined not by the individual or the market economy but by the community's values as a whole, (b) the individual's judgement of the good is replaced by the shared vision of the community and (c) political legitimacy in the community should identify with the common good.

The communitarians like the Positive Liberals or the Marxists also believe that man is a social being and true freedom of the individual is only possible in the community. The task of politics they argue is not the good of the individual or the protection of his rights

but the good of the society as a whole. Politics should be an activity that encourages the cultural concept of a good life for the community in a participatory social set up.

Gandhiji had also proposed what must be regarded as a communitarian notion of the common good in his notion of *Sarvodaya*. He meant by sarvodaya a harmonious welfare and goodwill to all. He also suggested the purpose of politics is to create a society based upon the principle of *Samanvaya*, i.e., harmony among classes, groups and individuals and institutions, ideas and ideologies. This common good can be achieved through six principles: Equanimity, non-violence, decentralisation, *satyagraha*, synthesis and world peace.

(d) The Study of Power View - Politics as the Study of Power

Even though from the earliest times it has been recognised that politics is in many ways fundamentally a study of power, it is an American school of politics called the Chicago School of Political Science which suggested that to make the study of politics scientific it is necessary to make politics a study of power as the essence of politics. In all the traditional classical schools thought politics focussed on the common good, but in this new proposed scientific study of politics more emphasis was laid on methods and techniques and on creating a study based upon facts. This school asserted that political science had been influenced by ethics, morality, religion, patriotism etc but it needs to be based on behavioural psychology, empirical sociology and economics studied as a science as opposed to political economy. They also argued that studying politics as a study of the state is insufficient.

There is no single accepted definition of power. Many people have defined power differently. Sociologist Max Weber defined politics in terms of power as follows: "Politics is the struggle to share or influence the distribution of power, whether between states or among the groups within a state. Max Weber defined power itself as 'the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his own despite resistance, regardless of the basis on which this probability rests'.

Power can be of different natures. It can be the simple relationship where one party attempts to mould the will of the other in a direct visible manner and if he succeeds we can say he is powerful. It can also be of an indirect nature where for instance where one party controls the other not directly but indirectly by limiting the agenda of their interaction to his convenience and suitability rather than of the other. Lastly and this is the most complex power can be exercised by shaping other's beliefs about what is and is not in their best interest which may have nothing to do with the reality of what is really in their best interest. Thus exerting power by creating a false consciousness. Lukes for instance observed that in many capitalist societies, workers accept the system even though their real interest lies in radical change. Tools like the process of education and mass media etc can all be used in exerting this form of power and control.

Even though the concept of power is one of the most important concepts in political theory there is a lack of agreement among thinkers about its scientific definition and the conceptual context in which it should be placed. Hence the view of politics that relies on a study of power is to that extent weak and limited.

All forms of power whether of money-power, muscle-power (legal or illegal), derived from social customs etc can be broadly categorized according to John Kenneth Galbraith in three categories: (i) Coercive power or the power of punishment (ii) Compensatory power or the power of winning submission by an offer of reward, i.e., by giving something to those who bow down to the power and (iii) Conditioned power which is the most subtle because it is exercised by changing beliefs and includes persuasion, education, culture etc.

Basically there are only three *forms* of power: Political, Economic and Ideological.

Political Power

The power of political coercion and political authority is referred to as political power. This power is based on the power of force or muscle power ultimately - exerted by the state or potentially capable of being exerted by the state. In fact Law is nothing but a set of rules according to which the coercive physical power will be exercised by the state. It is this power which is used to implement policies in democracies and punish those who disobey whatever the consequences and hardship that it causes to the people on whom it is forced. For instance many shopkeepers in Delhi and their staff might lose their livelihoods if sealing due to implementing for urban planning rules is done but that is a consequence and the power of state coercion is used to make everybody fall in line. In Marxian analysis, political power is basically a derivative of economic power and does not stand on its own. Those who control the economic production in society always inevitably corner it and appropriate it to themselves. Thus also unlike power theorists who believe in the decentralisation of political power Marxist thinkers emphasise the unified power of a particular class.

Economic Power

A powerful minority can exercise its will over a powerless majority even more than by political or legal power than by exerting economic power. The holders of economic power can influence submission of others by offering rewards or denying them and thus can be more powerful than political or legal power. In India we often get the feeling that the rich and the powerful get away with legal violations but it is the poor who have to suffer. This is because economic power always leads to political power in the end. As mentioned above Classical Marxist theory considers economic power as the source of all other dimensions of power According to the Marxist definition economic power consists of the ownership of the means of production, distribution and exchange of material goods and services in society. political power is the concentrated expression of the economic

power but at the same time, it exerts a great retroactive influence upon the latter. No class can establish its lasting economic influence without the active help and protection of political power. To that extent political power becomes more important than economic power.

Ideological Power

Apart from political and economic power, there is another form of exerting power known as ideological power. The Marxist thinkers were the first to point out the reality of this form of power and pointed out its subtle power. Later even the liberal schools of thought accepted this form of power and called it by various names like 'political culture', 'political socialisation' etc. Developing and exerting of ideological power is a process where the attitudes, values, symbols, traditions etc of the masses are gradually moulded and shaped by a minority leadership according to their own plans and agendas and thereby a certain level of deference, loyalty and obedience is established. This gradual process of achieving persuasion is even done sometimes by using the mass media like newspapers and television channels or rallies, meetings and yatras etc. Some liberal thinkers like Max Weber, Lucian Pye, Sydney Verba etc associated this ideological power with religion, education, culture, literature and history.

Marxist thinkers have however taken the position that ideological power acts like a mediator in the context of other powers in the society. Economic power transforms itself into political power using ideological power as a means to achieve this goal. Marxism has focussed on how the dominant economic classes in society, in a situation of open free market competition is able to achieve and secure its dominance always. Marx had said that the ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas because that class, which is the ruling material force in society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force. The class, which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control too of the means for influencing minds and attitudes. This control can create what Marx called a 'false consciousness' which is used to hide the underlying economic factors and make class exploitation legitimate.

Question:

1. What is Politics? .
2. Compare the Liberal and Marxists views of politics? .
3. Write a short note on the communitarian views of politics.

Suggested Reading:

1. Harold J. Laski, 'A Grammar of Politics'.

INTRODUCTION TO POLITICAL THOUGHT
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After reading this lesson you will be familiar with:

- **What is Political Theory? .**
- **The relevance of Political Theory? .**
- **Why is it important to study the history of political thought? .**

The word theory refers to a body of logically collected and analysed body of knowledge. And Politics as we know is about many things including relationships among individuals and groups and classes and the state, and state institutions like the judiciary, bureaucracy etc. So one definition of Political Theory given by David Weld sees political theory as a network of concepts and generalisations about political life involving ideas, assumptions and statements about the nature, purpose and key features of government, state and society, and about the political capabilities of human beings'. Andrew Hacker defines it as 'a combination of a disinterested search for the principles of good state and good society on the one hand, and a disinterested search for knowledge of political and social reality on the other'.

What is Political Theory?.

A rather comprehensive definition has been given by Gould and Kolb who defined political theory as a 'sub-field of political science which includes: (i) political philosophy - a moral theory of politics and a historical study of political ideas, (ii) a scientific criterion, (iii) a linguistic analysis of political ideas, (iv) the discovery and systematic development of generalisations about political behaviour'. We can conclude that political theory is concerned basically with the study of the phenomenon of the state both in philosophy as well as empirical terms. An attempt is made to provide explanations, descriptions and prescriptions regarding the state and political institutions. Also of course there is an underlying theme of studying the moral philosophical purpose. The thinker Weinstein had put it very succinctly when he had suggested that political theory is basically an activity, which involves posing questions, developing responses to those questions and creating imaginative perspectives on the public life of human beings. the questions that are asked are like what is the nature and purpose of the state and why should we prefer one form of state over another; how do we judge the ends, aims and methods of political organisation; what is and should be the relationship between the state and the individual. Through out history political theory has been answering these questions. It has been regarded as important because the fate of man is dependent on the kind of system of rulers and the ruled that is achieved and whether it leads to united action for the common good.

Political Theory and Political Thought

Political theory is sometimes synonymously regarded with political thought but it is important to understand they don't necessarily mean the same thing. Political thought is a generalized term which comprises all thoughts, theories and values of a person or a group of persons or a community on state and questions related to the state. Any person expressing his views whether he is a professor, journalist, writer, novelist, poet etc and of course if he is a politician that has a bearing on our lives and that is about he state and governance and related questions then he is engaging in political thought. His thoughts *may or may not* comprise a theory if it is not a systematic logical hypothesis advanced to explain historical and political phenomenon related to political rule of the state and governance etc. Political thought thus is always *of* persons or groups while political theory is a self-contained and self-standing explanation or speculation or theory attempting to answer questions and explain history and the predict likely events in the future. Of course this theory is always some individual thinker' s creation. Barker had commented that while political thought is the immanent philosophy of a whole age, political theory is the speculation of a particular thinker.

Political Theory and Political Philosophy

Philosophy is *all* thinking really on anything and everything in search of the truth and wisdom. When this search is on political topics we call it political philosophy. Hence it may not necessarily have a theory to propose and that is the distinction between political philosophy and political thought. So while political theory is a part of political philosophy mostly political philosophy is much wider and need not necessarily be comprised of any theories.

Thus we can say political philosophy is the study of fundamental questions about the state, government, politics, liberty, justice, property, rights, law and the enforcement of a legal code by authority etc: what they are, why (or even if) they are needed, what makes a government legitimate, what rights and freedoms it should protect and why, what form it should take and why, what the law is, and what duties citizens owe to a legitimate government, if any, and when it may be legitimately overthrown or not. We often refer "political philosophy" to mean a general view, or specific ethic, belief or attitude, about politics that does not necessarily belong to the whole technical discipline of philosophy.

Political philosophy is often not concerned with contemporary issues but with the more universal issues in the political life of man. But a political theorist is looking at contemporary political life mostly and while he is interested in explaining the nature and purpose of the state and general questions like that he is also looking to describe and understand the realities of political behavior, the actual relations between state and citizens, and the role of power in the society.

While studying political science one gets the feeling political theory has to be supplemented by political philosophy. Otherwise it appears barren and irrelevant.

Political Theory and Political Science

Political Science is a comprehensive subject or field of study of which political theory is only a sub-field. Political Science includes everything: political thought, political theory, political philosophy, political ideology, institutional or structural framework, comparative politics, public administration, international law and organisation etc. Some thinkers have stressed on the science aspect of political science and they suggest when political science is studied as a science with scientific methods political theory to the extent it is a part of political philosophy can not be regarded as political science because whereas there is no room for abstract intuitive conclusions or speculations in political science, political philosophy relies on exactly those un-exact methods. Political theory is neither pure thought, nor pure philosophy, nor pure science.

Some Basic Characteristic of Political Theory

1. A political theory is generally the creation on individual thinker based on his moral and intellectual position and when propounding his theory he is looking explain the events, phenomenon and the mysteries generally of mankind's political life. The theory may or may not be accepted as true but it always can be regarded as one more theory. Generally we find the political theory of an individual thinker is put forward in a classic work y the thinker like Plato did in his *Republic* or Rawl in *A Theory of Justice*.

2. A political theory attempts to provide explanations on questions relating to mankind, the societies he formed and history and historical events generally. It also suggests ways of resolving conflicts and sometimes even advocates revolutions. There are also often predictions made about the future.

3. Political theory thus is also sometimes not only providing explanations and predictions but also sometimes actively influencing and participating in historical events particularly when they propose political action of a particular kind and that line of action is widely adopted. The great positive liberal thinker Harold Laski had commented that the task of political theorists is not merely of *description* but also of *prescription* on what ought to be.

4. Political theory is also usually discipline based and thought he subject of study remains the same the theorist might be a philosopher, historian, economist, theologian or a sociologist etc.

5. Political theories are often also the basis for a whole ideology. The liberal theories became the basis for liberalism and Marx's theory became the basis for Marxian socialist ideology. A political theorist proposed by a thinker is usually always reflecting the

political ideology of the thinker too. That is also the reason why when there are conflicts between ideologies it leads to debates about the theories underlying those ideologies.

Issues in Political Theory

The issues that have held prominence in political theory have changed over time. Classical and early political theory was mainly concerned with the search for a morally perfect political order and focused on questions like the nature and purpose of the state, the basis on which political authority should be used and the problem of political disobedience. The rise of the modern nation state and changes in the economic structure and the industrial revolution gave rise to new priorities and the focus shifted to individualism and liberty of the individual and his relationship to society and the state. Issues like rights, duties, liberty, equality, and property became more important. Gradually it also became important to explain the inter-relation between one concept and the other such as liberty and equality or, justice and liberty or, equality and property. After the second world war a new kind of empirical political theory emerged which studied the political behaviour of man and believed in making theoretical conclusions on that basis. Also the behavioural scholars created new issues for study often borrowed from other disciplines. Some of these issues are political culture and legitimacy, political system, elites, groups, parties etc. In the last two decades a number of different issues have emerged like identity, gender, environmentalism, ecology and community etc. Also there has been a resurgence of value-based political theory with a new focus on the basic issues of freedom, equality and justice. The traditional twin ways of looking at issues - liberal and marxist - therefore is also changing.

Relevance of Political Theory

We humans as social beings live together and societies where we share the resources, jobs and rewards. We are also individuals needing some basic human rights. The process of organising state and society therefore becomes important to maximize harmony and prosperity and to allow the circumstances for individual self-realisation. So to facilitate the unity and integrity of human societies or the collective needs of society political theory becomes important it tries to study and find solutions to problems in this process. The relevance lies in evolving various approaches regarding the nature and purpose of the state, the basis of political authority and the best form of government to practice, relations between the state and the individual in the context of his basic rights. Apart from this political theory also seeks to establish the moral criterion for judging the ethical worth of a political state and to suggest alternative political arrangements and practices. To sum up in brief the relevance of political theory lies in the following:

(a) In providing an explanation and description of political phenomenon (b) helping select the political goals and actions for a community and (c) helps in providing the basis for making moral judgments.

Also it has to be remembered increasingly at least in contemporary times states face challenges of poverty, corruption, over-population and ethnic and racial tensions, environment pollution etc. This is not to mention international problems like conflicts etc. Political Theory seeks to study the present and future problems of political life of the society and to suggest solutions for dealing with those problems. David Held has commented that the task of the political theorist is very great in its complexity because in the absence of systematic study, there is a danger that politics will be left to the ignorant and self-seeking people who are in pursuit of power.

Thus if one has to systematically think about the nature and purpose of the state and the problems of government while looking at the socio-political reality and keeping in mind the ideals and political philosophy, then one has to take the route of theoretically studying the problem. Thus political theory is relevant. Also studying political theory at an individual level makes one aware of one's rights and duties and helps one understand and appreciate the socio-political realities and problems like poverty, violence, corruption etc. Political theory is also important because it can go forward basing itself on the theories and propose the means and directions for changing society to establish an ideal society. Marxist theory for instance is an example of a theory which not only proposes the direction but also goes so far as to advocate a revolution for establishing an egalitarian state. If the political theory is sound and it can be transmitted and communicated to people then it can become a very powerful force for the advancement of society and mankind.

The Important Schools of Political Theory

The most important schools of political thought that have lasted in importance and have stood the test of time so to say are as follows:

1. Classical Political Theory
2. Liberal political Theory
3. Marxist Political Theory
4. Empirical Scientific Political Theory
5. Contemporary Political Theory

Classical Political Theory

The political theories that emerged starting from the 6th century B.C. and evolved through the Greeks, Romans and early European Christian thinkers and philosophers is referred to as Classical Political Theories. Among the Greeks, Plato and Aristotle are the two thinkers who are studied and who have great influence till today. Classical political theory was deeply dominated by philosophy and the whole focus was on taking a holistic gaze searching for the most general of truths. So there was no clear distinction between philosophical, theological and political issues and political science or thought was not separately recognised as a discipline as such. Political theory was concerned with probing

into issues, asking important questions and serving as a sort of conscience keeper of politics. The underlying quest was to arrive at the best possible form of government. The state and government were also viewed as a tool for realising the moral goals of man and society and for promoting the good. Thus the state was to serve as some sort of promoter to foster high moral standards among the members of the community. There had some debate about whether the individual good should be the priority or the common good. The common good was required as more complete than the private good of the individual. The classical tradition also sought to search ways for an ideal state and a stable system. The main questions that the classical tradition was asked was what is the best form of government? and who should rule and why? . Also how should conflict situations be resolved.

Liberal Political Theory

With the historical period referred to as Renaissance and Reformation in Europe which was followed by the Industrial Revolution, the dominance of the classical tradition came to an end. This new philosophical wave was led by thinkers like Hobbes, Locke, Thomas, Jefferson, Thomas Paine, Jeremy Bentham, J.S. Mill, Herbert Spencer and a host of other writers. The main thrust of the liberal tradition was the individual's rights and the state was merely regarded as a contract between individuals to benefit from the conflict resolution mechanism that a system of rule of law provides. The main aim of the state in the liberal tradition is to help individuals realise their fundamental inalienable rights. In fact the liberal thinkers went so far as to propose that when the basic contractual relationship between the individual and the state is violated, the individuals have not only the right but the responsibility to revolt and establish a new government. Social control is best secured by law. The new liberal theories also dismissed the idea of common good and an organic community and instead advocated that the government should govern as less as possible for individual rights to reign supreme and free him from political, social and economic restraints as far as possible.

Marxist Political Theory

The fundamental changes that industrial revolution brought about caused inequality and a large class of impoverished industrial workers emerged. The basic liberal position that supported total economic freedom was challenged by Karl Marx and Engels and their followers who in the later half of the nineteenth century proposed what they called 'scientific socialism'. Socialism predated the theory of Marx but he gave it a strong theoretical foundation. Marx offered a new way of looking at the history up to that time and suggested that the task of knowledge is not just to understand the world but also to change the social life of mankind for the better. For that he suggested a revolutionary path. He suggested that to win the basics of life for their emancipation he working class has to takeover the means of production and the means of production should be controlled by the state. This takeover will need to happen via a revolution he suggested because the upper classes will use the power of the state to crush any attempts for

liberation and emancipation of the lower classes. Marx saw societies that liberal capitalism helped create as fundamentally unequal as a consequence of property concentration with a few families of fortune. Hence he wanted to create a society where "man shall not be exploited by man" and where each individual will have the full opportunity to develop his or her personality and potential. He also was the first major thinker to stress on the historical exploitation of the female gender and the need for women's liberation. The most important themes of Marxist political theory are class division, class struggle, property relations, modes of production, state as an instrument of class domination and revolution by the proletariat. Marxism also suggests that rights, liberty, equality, justice and democracy in a capitalist liberal democracy are really only enjoyed by the rich and properties classes because the state is controlled by the upper classes who use the institutions of the state as a tool for class exploitation. He believed real liberty and equality can only be achieved in a classless and stateless society. Thus whereas Liberal theory provided the theoretical basis for a capitalist free market system, Marxist political theory provided the basis for the establishment of a socialist state through revolutionary action.

Empirical-Scientific Political Theory

In America a new kind of political theory was developed particularly in the post second world war period that suggested relying on the scientific method (instead of philosophical) and base theories upon facts (rather than on values). Political Scientists at the Chicago University (known as the Chicago School) such as Charles Merriam, Harold Lasswell, Gosnell, David Easton, Stuart Rice etc focused on studying politics in the context of behaviour of individual human beings as members of a political community. The task of political theory according to this new school of thought is to formulate and systematize the concept of science of political behaviour in which emphasis is placed on empirical research than on political philosophy. The behavioural scientists suggested a political theorist should clarify and criticise systems of concepts which have empirical relevance to political behaviour.

Behavioural schools differed fundamentally from all the previous schools because they suggested that the job of political theory is only to explain political phenomenon and extrapolate from that and predict the future. It is not to make philosophical and moral judgements. It is not at all to advocate revolutionary action. Thus political theory is not to question or propose who rules, should rule and why but rather who does rule and how? . Or in other words it should not question the basis of the state but should be happy with he status quo, stability, equilibrium and harmony in the society. It should focus attention on the study of political behaviour of man, group and institutions irrespective of their good or bad character. Practical political theory is not only concerned with the study of the state but also with the political process.

Contemporary Political Theory

Since the 1970 the sole focus of the empiricists and behavioral scholars on science, value-free politics and methods came under criticism and lost popularity because it failed to address pressing political and social issues. So there has been a revival of interest in political theory in USA, Europe and other parts of the world. Thinkers like John Rawls, Robert Nozick, Habermas etc made noteworthy contributions and took up basic issues like liberty, equality, justice etc again. Theory again regained the status of a legitimate form of knowledge and enquiry. Also on the question of what exactly is science there emerged many views that challenged the old notions. Further many scholars opined that social sciences throw up distinctive problems that cannot be grasped by scientific models. This is because perceptions and resulting actions of men vary and the same phenomenon can be viewed differently by different minds who may interpret the social issues differently. Hence it is difficult to do an objective scientific analysis of social issues and events with scientific rigor.

The publication of John Rawls 1970 book *A Theory of Justice* was important because he examined basic issues like rights, duties and obligations with great brilliance and offered a justification of civil disobedience, and with an original enquiry into intergenerational justice. Scholars like Peter Laslett, John Pocock, Quentin Skinner and John Dunn were called the 'new historians' of political thought. Juergen Habermass and the Frankfurt School gave important theories and Ronald Dworkin focused on the philosophy of law. David Held has opined that contemporary political theory has four distinct tasks: *Philosophical*: to focus on the fundamental philosophical positions of the normative and conceptual framework; *Empirical*: to empirically understand and explain the concepts; *Historical*: to examine the important concepts in the historical context; and *Strategic*: to asses the feasibility of moving from where we are to where we might like to be.

Why study History of Political Thought? .

As has been mentioned above political thought concerns the state and its policies and decisions and activities. the various terms political science, political theory, political thought and political philosophy have not been used consistently in the same sense by scholars at all times. They have even been used as synonyms popularly. Political thought is the most general term of all these, which can be easily used to refer to the whole discipline easily and if we do that then political science and political philosophy become specific sub-categories. Also political thought also accommodates ethics and moral philosophy, theology, role of politics in human development and the dignity of political activity.

On the question which is the best way of studying political thought, Gould and Thursby have opined that there are two ways to study political thought.

The first is to list the all the political thought considered to be classic such as Plato's *Republic*, Aristotle's *Politics*, Machiavelli's *Prince*, Hobbes' *Leviathan*, Locke's *Two Treatises on Government*, Hegel's *Philosophy of Rights*, Marx's *The Communist Manifesto*, Rawl's *A Theory of Justice* and to make a note of the constant questions and approaches in them like: What is the meaning of freedom and equality? , Why men should obey the government at all? , What are the ideals and goals of a state and what is the meaning of democracy? etc. The problem in this method one can't not easily decide what should be classified as a classic.

The second method is of general philosophical methodology and applying it to political matters which means picking the central concepts problems, methods, questions etc from the classics and adding to that list important omissions if any. The items selected should then be arranged in an order from general principles to specific ones on the basis of importance. That way a coherent and comprehensive general account of political thought can be built.

The study of any social science is impossible without an understanding of the historical evolution of the subject. The political institutions and systems of political behaviour which we observe today are a result of evolution of centuries. A political theorist needs to study history to understand this evolution. He does not need to study the dates and colorful historical details of kings and princes and the battles they fought and the lives they led but rather the growth and changes in the economic structures, in technological capabilities and the impact that had and in political institutions and ways of governing. Social classes, political power and economic processes do not emerge overnight and cannot be understood by examining them in isolation in their contemporary settings. One needs to study the history of political thought to understand the evolving relationships between man, society and political authority and indeed the popular perceptions of those relationships through history. The study of the views and theories of past political thinkers enables one to go beyond the dominant contemporary political orthodoxies and draw intellectual resources from the past. A reflection on the thoughts of past thinkers provides a guideline to actual theorising. Political theories thus emerge not from nowhere but is constructed by building, expanding and developing the vocabularies of the past author's texts. This also enables easy comparison and judgement between past and contemporary works.

Ideology has been inseparable from political thought and proceeding historically it has been possible to build theories that are supportive of a particular ideology. Of course history can be both used and misused but is has been always used to buttress theoretical constructions. For instance the same history of Europe led Marx and Engel to support their arguments that the political history of mankind is a history of class struggle but the liberal thinkers saw it differently and some like Burke and Tocqueville glorified the past and saw it as an age of harmony, civility and ordered liberty.

Whatever the ideological pre-dispositions a study of the history political thought allows for evaluating the social and economic circumstances in which the political institutions arose and maintained themselves. Without a sense of history political theory can not be constructed because it would then not take into account the full range of human social behaviour. Taking the historical route often throws up patterns and order for the theorist to discern.

Another reason to study the historical development of political thought is to examine if the political thoughts of a particular time influenced the actions of men and if so how. Some thinkers like Plato and Marx have argued that ideas and philosophical thoughts have little no effect on the conduct of men in power. But there are other thinkers who have argued that the history of political thought and the history of political action are quite related and the thoughts of thinkers do significantly influence actual political action.

The reverse - that is whether political thoughts are influenced by political events and historical circumstances is equally important and another reason for studying from the historical point of view. It has been argued for instance that the thoughts of Plato were influenced by a decline in the moral standards of the city-states and that of John Locke by the Glorious revolution and that of Marx by the economic inequality created by industrial capitalism. Thinkers are also men of their times and are influenced by the events and circumstances of their times. But the lasting value of their theories only is only there if it points out at some general truth which can transcend societies and classes and ethnic communities. For instance the political thoughts of Plato, Aristotle, J.S. Mill or Marx throw up principles, which often have universal value over time.

Social sciences like Political Sciences and Thought is meant to improve our understanding of the world and history is a part of social sciences. Historical view is essential to create theoretical constructions of human life and social phenomenon that transcends time. We need to ask though while studying a theory from the past (which inevitably drew on the historical circumstances present at the time the theory was proposed) what meaning has political thought in the contemporary world that we live in. In answering that question we are able to test the lasting validity of the theory. But it has to be realised ultimately the history of political thought is important because the central theme is timeless. Neal Wood while commenting on the importance of studying the classical texts of political thought has commented:

'...these texts reflect and comment upon that nature of the Western state with all its blemishes and deficiencies as well as benefits. Some of the texts call for radical recognition of state, others for its reform and in so doing grapple with fundamental social and political problems which we share with past. Whether we like it or not, these works have indelibly stamped our modern culture and the world today'.

Questions:

1. What is political theory? .
2. Discuss the relevance of political theory.
3. Why do we need to study political theory? .

Suggested Reading:

1. Hampster-Monk, *A History of Modern Political Thought*