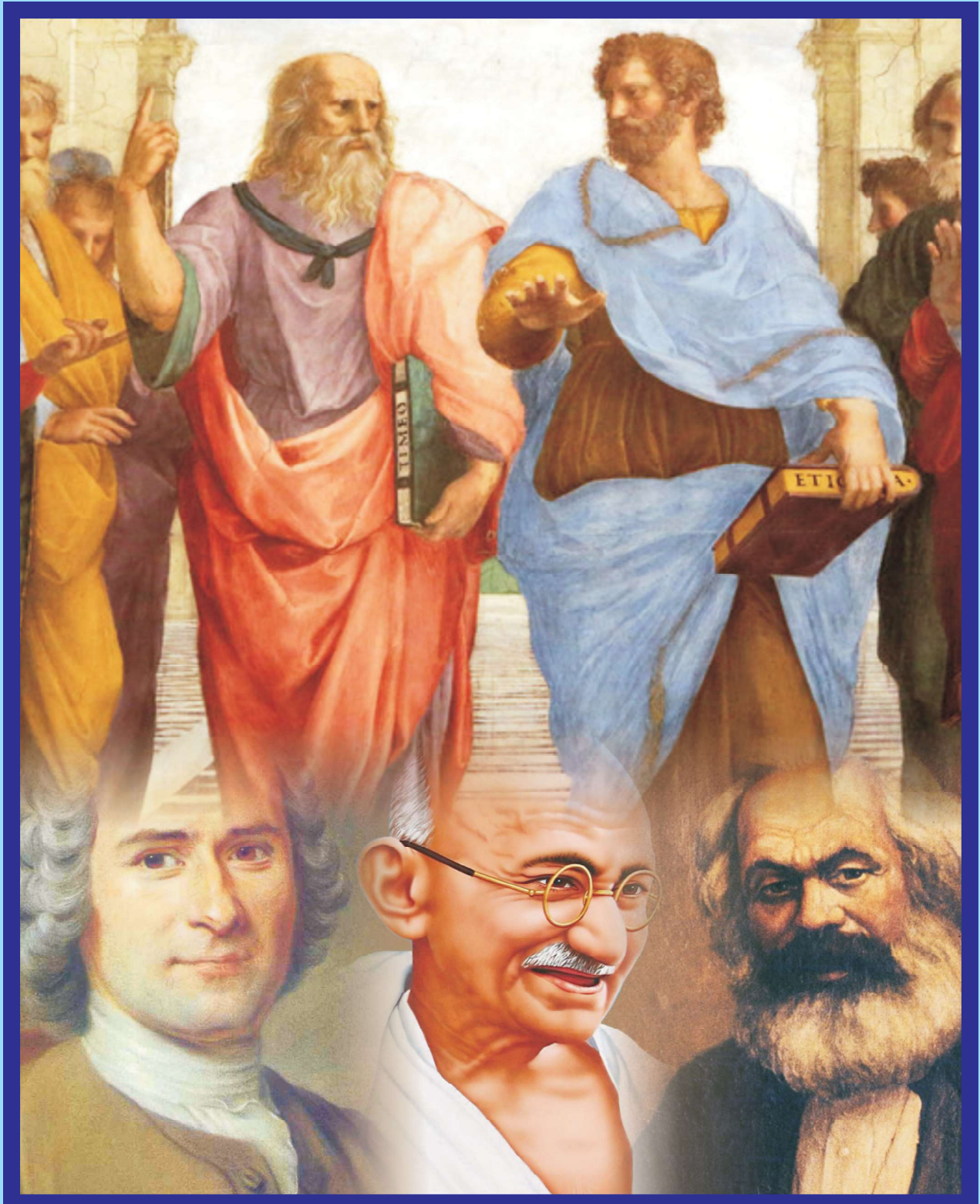




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# BPSC-131 INTRODUCTION TO POLITICAL THEORY



# **INTRODUCTION TO POLITICAL THEORY**

**School of Social Sciences  
Indira Gandhi National Open University**

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August, 2019

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ISBN: 978-93-89200-51-5

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Printed and published on behalf of the Indira Gandhi National Open University, New Delhi, by, Registrar MPDD, IGNOU, New Delhi.

Laser Typeset by : Tessa Media & Computers, C-206, A.F.E.-II, Okhla, New Delhi

Printed at : Chandra Prabhu Offset Printing Works Pvt. Ltd., C-40, Sector-8, Noida, U.P.

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# COURSE INTRODUCTION: INTRODUCTION TO POLITICAL THEORY

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Theories are the conceptual lenses through which we can sort out the plethora of facts that we confront daily. A good theory has certain features. The first virtue is parsimony. A theory should be parsimonious to forgo unnecessary speculation and confusing details. Second feature of a sound theory is *accuracy*. Theories must be sufficiently detailed to allow for accurate assessments and explanations of the world. An elegant theory simply yet precisely interprets, describes, explains or predicts some aspect of the world. However, these virtues are mostly identified as features of scientific theories. The explanatory and predictive behaviour of natural sciences is not found in social sciences as too many uncontrolled and unforeseen forces affect political and social life and that is why, social and political practices are seldom replicable. In the light of these problems, some experts have argued that social scientists should not try to mimic the natural sciences; instead, they should develop their own standards and procedures. For theorists of social and political life, therefore, the ability to feel and think in ways similar to the object of study is a crucial component of their task.

Political theory does not exist in a vacuum and it should reflect social realities and human concerns. A good political theorist is able to move between social conditions and political concepts. Political theory must involve a good deal of knowledge of political practice and should explain how states, cultures and societies respond to political, social and economic changes. Another aspect of political theory is that it is always defined by the specific situations and problems political thinkers have witnessed. To understand political theory, we need to understand both the history of ideas on which the thinkers draw and the problems they considered themselves to be facing and to which their work was addressed. Studying the context in which political theory originally arose allows us to critically assess whose particular interests it reflected.

In the light of the above discussion, this course on **Introduction to Political Theory** is divided in four blocks.

Block 1 is **Introducing Political Theory** and has two units namely **What is Politics** and **What is Political Theory**. This section introduces the students to the idea of political theory, its historical evolution and main approaches to study it. This section also provides an insight into concepts of politics, state and power.

Block 2 is **Concepts** and has four units namely, **Liberty, Equality, Justice and Rights**. Block 3 is also **Concepts**, having four units namely, **Democracy, Gender, Citizenship, Civil Society and State**. These key concepts lay down the foundation for understanding of political theory and these two blocks cover their various interpretations.

Block 4 is **Debates in Political Theory** and has four units namely, **Democracy vs. Economic Growth, Liberty vs. Censorship, Protective Discrimination vs. Principle of Fairness** and **Family, State and Law**. These debates prompt us to consider that there is no settled way of understanding concepts and new insights and challenges help in understanding new political debates. Each unit has inbuilt Check Your Progress Exercises which would help students in examining their conceptual understanding of the subject. At the end of the course, Suggested Readings cover a list of useful books for further analysis.

**Block 1**  
**Introducing Political Theory**



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## **BLOCK 1 INTRODUCTION**

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Block 1 titled **Introducing Political Theory** is the introductory block of the present course and contains two units dealing with political theory. Political theory is political science in the full sense, and there could be no science without theory. So, political theory may legitimately and accurately be used as synonymous with political science. In this context. **Unit 1** What is Politics? deals with concepts of politics, state, power, legitimation and also the relationship among them. **Unit 2**, What is Political Theory? highlights concepts like political theory, thought and ideology. It also covers major approaches to study political theory.



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# UNIT 1 WHAT IS POLITICS?\*

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## Structure

- 1.0 Objectives
- 1.1 Introduction
- 1.2 Politics as a Practical Activity
  - 1.2.1 Politics Difficult to Define Precisely
  - 1.2.2 Nature of Politics
  - 1.2.3 Politics: An Inescapable Feature of the Human Condition
- 1.3 What is Politics?
- 1.4 What is State?
  - 1.4.1 State: Differences on Account of Political Institutions/ Social Context
  - 1.4.2 Ralph Miliband's Views on State
  - 1.4.3 Various Forms of State
- 1.5 Politics as a Vocation
- 1.6 The Legitimate Use of Power
  - 1.6.1 Max Weber on Legitimation
  - 1.6.2 Legitimation: Central Concern of Political Science
  - 1.6.3 Process of 'Delegitimation'
  - 1.6.4 Manipulated Consent
  - 1.6.5 Personnel of the State Machine: The Elite
- 1.7 Let Us Sum Up
- 1.8 References
- 1.9 Answers to Check Your Progress Exercises

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## 1.0 OBJECTIVES

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This introductory unit of the first block of the new course in political theory at the Bachelor's Degree level tells you about the basic meaning of politics and thus, about the fundamentals of the discipline of political science. After going through this unit, you should be able to:

- Explain what is politics;
- Explain the meaning of state;
- Describe and explain the concept of power; and
- Discuss legitimation and delegitimation.

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## 1.1 INTRODUCTION

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The main objective of this unit is to understand the concept of 'political'. The essence of political is the quest for bringing about an order that men consider good. The term politics is derived from the Greek word polis meaning both 'city' and 'state'. Politics among the ancient Greeks was a new way of thinking, feeling and above all, being related to one's fellows. As citizens they all were



equal, although the citizens varied in positions in terms of their wealth, intelligence, etc. It is the concept of political which makes the citizens rational. Politics is the activity specific to this new thing called a citizen. A science of politics is possible, because politics itself follows regular patterns, even though it is at the mercy of the human nature from which it arises.

Greek political studies dealt with constitutions and made generalisations about the relations between human nature and political associations. Perhaps, its most powerful component was the theory of recurrent cycles. Monarchies tend to degenerate into tyranny, tyrannies are overthrown by aristocracies, which degenerate into oligarchies exploiting the population, which are overthrown by democracies, which in turn degenerate into the intolerable instability of mob rule, whereupon some powerful leader establishes himself as a monarch and the cycle begins all over again. It is Aristotle's view that some element of democracy is essential to the best kind of balanced constitution, which he calls a polity. He studied many constitutions and was particularly interested in the mechanics of political change. He thought that revolutions always arise out of some demand for equality. Ancient Rome is the supreme example of politics as an activity conducted by human beings holding offices that clearly limit the exercise of power. When the Romans thought about power, they used two words in order to acknowledge an important distinction.

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## **1.2 POLITICS AS A PRACTICAL ACTIVITY**

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Politics as a practical activity is the discourse and the struggle over organisation of human possibilities. As such, it is about power; that is to say, it is about the capacity of social agents, agencies and institutions to maintain or transform their environment, social and physical. It is about the resources, which underpin this capacity, and about the forces that shape and influence its exercise. Accordingly, politics is a phenomenon found in all groups, institutions and societies, cutting across private and public life. It is expressed in all the relations, institutions and structures that are implicated in the production and reproduction of the life of societies. Politics creates and conditions all aspects of our lives and it is at the core of the development of collective problems, and the modes of their resolutions.

### **1.2.1 Politics Difficult to Define Precisely**

A crisp definition of politics—one that fits just those things we instinctively call 'political' – is impossible. Politics is a term with varied uses and nuances. Perhaps, the nearest we can come to a capsule statement is this: politics is the activity by which groups reach binding collective decisions through attempting to reconcile differences among their members. There are significant points in this definition.

### **1.2.2 Nature of Politics**

Politics is a collective activity, involving people who accept a common membership or at least acknowledge a shared fate. Thus, Robinson Crusoe could not practice politics. Politics presumes an initial diversity of views, if not about goals, then at least about means. Were we all to agree all the time, politics would be redundant. Politics involves reconciling such differences through discussion and persuasion. Communication is, therefore, central to politics. Political

decisions become authoritative policy for a group, binding members to decisions that are implemented by force, if necessary. Politics scarcely exists if decisions are reached solely by violence, force, or use of threat, undermining the process of reaching a collective decision. The necessity of politics arises from the collective character of human life. We live in a group that must reach collective decisions: about sharing resources, about relating to other groups and about planning for the future. A family discussion where to take its vacation, a country deciding whether to go to war, the world seeking to limit the damage caused by pollution – are examples of groups seeking to reach decisions which affect all their members. As social creatures, politics is part of our fate: we have no choice but to practice it.

### 1.2.3 Politics: An Inescapable Feature of the Human Condition

So although the term ‘politics’ is often used cynically, to criticize the pursuit of private advantage under the guise of public interest, politics is in fact, an inescapable feature of the human condition. Indeed, the Greek philosopher Aristotle argued that ‘man is by nature a political animal’. By this, he meant not just that politics is unavoidable, but rather that it is the essential human activity; political engagement is the feature which most sharply separates us from other species. For Aristotle, people can only express their true nature as reasoning, virtuous beings through participation in a political community. Members of a group rarely agree; at least initially, on what course of action to follow. Even if there is agreement over goals, there may still be a skirmish over means. Yet a decision must be reached, one way or the other, and once made it will commit all members of the group. Thus, politics consists in procedures for allowing a range of views to be expressed and then combined into an overall decision. As Shively points out, ‘Political action may be interpreted as a way to work out rationally the best common solution to a common problem - or at least a way to work out a reasonable common solution.’ That is, politics consists of public choice.

#### Check Your Progress 1

**Note:** i) Use the space given below for your answer.

ii) See the end of the unit for tips for your answer.

1) What is politics as a practical activity?

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2) Discuss the essential nature of politics.

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### 1.3 WHAT IS POLITICS?

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Everybody has some idea about the meaning of the term politics; to some people the question may even appear quite superfluous. 'Politics' is what one reads about in the papers or watches on television. It deals with the activities of the politicians, notably the leaders of political parties. What is politics all about? Why, precisely, are these activities 'political' and what defines the nature of politics? If one starts with a definition couched in terms of the activities of politicians, one might say that politics concerns the rivalries of politicians in their struggle for power. This would certainly be the kind of definition with which most people would agree. There would, also, probably be agreement that politics refers to the relationship between states on an international scale. 'Politics is about power and how it is distributed.' But power is not an abstract entity floating in the void. It is embodied in human beings. Power is relationship existing wherever a person can impose his will on other persons, making them obey whether they want to or not. Hence, a situation arises characterized by leadership, a relation of domination and subordination. Max Weber, in his famous lecture of 1918, 'Politics as a Vocation', started by proposing that the concept of politics was 'extremely broad-based and comprises any kind of independent leadership in action.' In whatever context such leadership in action exists, politics is present. In our terms, political would include any situation where power relations existed, i.e. where people were constrained or dominated or subject to authority of one kind or another. It would also include situations where people were constrained by a set of structures or institutions rather than by the subjective will of persons. Such a broad definition has the advantage of showing that politics is not necessarily a matter of government, nor solely concerned with the activities of politicians. Politics exists in any context where there is a structure of power and struggle for power in an attempt to gain or maintain leadership positions. In this sense, one can speak about the politics of trade unions or about 'university politics'. One can discuss 'sexual politics', meaning the domination of men over women or the attempt to alter this relation. In a narrower sense, however everything is politics, which affects our lives through the agency of those who exercise and control state power, and the purposes for which they use that control. In the lecture quoted above, Weber after initially giving a very broad definition of politics in terms of general leadership, went on to produce a far more limited definition: 'We wish to understand by politics', he wrote, 'only the leadership, or the influencing of leadership, of a political association, hence today, of a state'. In this perspective, the state is the central political association. A political question is one that relates to the state, to the topic of who controls state power, for what purposes that power is used and with what consequences, and so on.

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### 1.4 WHAT IS STATE?

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A new issue comes here: what is state? The question is by no means an easy one to answer, nor is there a general agreement as to what the answer should be. It must first be noted that there are various forms of the state, which differ from one another in important ways. The Greek city-state is clearly different from the modern nationstate, which has dominated world politics since the French Revolution. The contemporary liberal-democratic state, which exists in Britain and Western Europe, is different from the fascist-type state of Hitler or Mussolini. It is also different from the state, which existed in the former USSR and in

Eastern Europe. An important part of the study of politics, and certainly an integral element of this book, is the explanation of what is meant by those terms. The purpose is to show how each form distinguishes itself from the other and what the significance of such distinction is.

### **1.4.1 State: Differences on Account of Political Institutions/ Social Context**

States differ in terms of their political institutions as well as in terms of the social context within which they are situated and which they try to maintain. So, while the liberal-democratic state is characterized by representative institutions such as a parliament and an independent judiciary, the leader controls the fascist state. With respect to the social context, the crucial contrast is between Western and Soviet type systems in so far as the former are embedded in a society which is organized according to the principles of a capitalist economy, while in the latter case the productive resources of society are owned and controlled by the state. In each case, therefore, the state is differently structured, operates in a social framework of a very different kind, and this affects and influences to a large extent the nature of the state and the purposes, which it serves.

There are different forms of the state, but whatever form one has in mind, the state as such is not a monolithic block. To start with, the state is not the same as the government. It is rather a complex of various elements of which the government is only one. In a Western-type liberal-democratic state, those who form the government are indeed with the state power. They speak in the name of the state and take office in order to control the levers of state power. Nevertheless, to change the metaphor, the house of the state has many mansions and of those, the government occupies one.

### **1.4.2 Ralph Miliband's Views on State**

In his book *The State in Capitalist Society*, Ralph Miliband registers those different elements, which together constitute the state. The first, but by no means the only element of the state apparatus, is the government. The second is the administrative element, the civil service or the bureaucracy. This administrative executive is, in liberal-democratic systems, supposed to be neutral, carrying out the orders of politicians who are in power. In fact, however, the bureaucracy may well have its own authority and dispose of its own power. Third, in Miliband's list come the military and the police, the 'order-maintaining' or the repressive arm of the state; fourth, the judiciary. In any constitutional system, the judiciary is supposed to be independent of the holders of government power; it can act as a check on them. Fifth, element is the local government. In some federal systems, these units have considerable independence from the central government, controlling their own sphere of power, where the government is constitutionally debarred from interfering. The relationship between the central and the local government may become an important political issue, as witnessed by the controversy in British politics over the abolition of the Greater London Council and the metropolitan counties, the argument about financing local government, 'rate capping', and so on. Sixth and finally, one can add to the list representative assemblies and the parliament in the British system. One may also mention political parties, though they are not normally part of the state apparatus, at least not in a liberal democracy. They play their obvious role in the

representative assembly and it is there that, at least partly, the competitive fight between the government and the opposition is enacted.

### 1.4.3 Various Forms of State

Modern state is identified as the nation state. The state has come to acquire its present character through a historical process that extends to thousands of years. It is interplay of various factors like religion, kinship, war, property, political consciousness and technological advances. In the process of historical evolution of state, there have been following forms – Tribal State, Oriental Empire, Greek City State, Roman World Empire, Feudal State and the Modern Nation State. The Modern Nation state arose after the Treaty of Westphalia was signed in 1648. It led to emergence of territorial state consolidating political authority within a particular territory excluding domestic from external. The separation of territory into distinct states each with their own national spirit paved the way for establishment of Modern Nation State along with rise of international law, legal equality of states and modern theory of sovereignty. American and French revolutions further contributed to emergence of nation states.

The modern concept of state is dominated by Liberal and Marxist perspectives. The liberal perspective is dynamic as it has changed with time depending on interests and needs of individuals and the society. The early liberal view of state was negative as it favored non-interference in individual matters. However, 20<sup>th</sup> century liberalism is associated with welfare state which tries to reconcile individual liberty with social good. The Marxist notion rejects liberal idea of state, calling the state as an instrument of class and seeks to establish a classless and stateless society through the proletarian revolution. However, that did not happen after the Russian revolution in Russia and instead of a classless and stateless society, we saw power getting concentrated in hands of a few during Soviet times. Feminist perspectives on state can be mainly seen from two angles – liberal and radical. Liberal feminists say that state can play a role in bringing equality among men and women by taking steps like increasing seats for women in parliament, extending welfare schemes to women etc. However, radicals see state as an instrument of power and blame unequal distribution of labor in a family for women’s unequal status in society. Hence, they contest the liberal view that state is impartial and neutral.

#### Check Your Progress 2

**Note:** i) Use the space given below for your answer.

ii) See the end of the unit for tips for your answer.

1) What do you understand by the term politics?

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2) Describe Ralph Miliband’s views on state.

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3) Discuss various forms of state.

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## 1.5 POLITICS AS A VOCATION

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The point brings us back to Weber and his already quoted lecture, ‘Politics as a Vocation’. After arguing that politics is concerned above all with the central political association, the state, Weber continued by maintaining that a definition of the state could not be given in terms of the tasks which it undertakes or of the ends it pursues. There was no task, which specifically determined the state. Therefore, one had to define the state in terms of the specific means, which it employed, and these means were, ultimately, physical force. The state, Weber wrote, ‘is a human community that successfully claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory’. There are three distinct elements combined here: a given territory, or geographical area, which the state controls; the use of physical force to maintain its control and thirdly, but most important, the monopoly of the legitimate use of such force or coercion. This legitimacy must be acknowledged by most, if not all, of those who are subject to the state’s power. Weber concluded that for him politics meant ‘striving to share power or striving to influence the distribution of power either among states or among groups within a state.’ It was also mentioned that each state exists within a particular social context. The study of politics is vitally concerned with the relationship of state and society. A state centered perspective on politics does not imply that its study should neglect what happens in the wider sphere of society and how that may, as Weber says, ‘influence the distribution of power’. A further fact cannot be ignored: this is the continued growth and centralization of state power. If one sees the state in terms of a specialized apparatus of domination, then the history of modern times has been marked by the extension of its scale and grip. The modern state requires an increasingly complex bureaucracy dealing with a mounting variety of tasks. It needs larger and more sophisticated armed forces, more regulative welfare agencies, and engages in a wider range of activities than was the case before. This extension of the state’s sphere of action, its growth and development, applies both to liberal-democratic systems in their capitalist socio-economic context, and to socialist systems with their collective economic framework. Weber saw such growth manifested above

all in the emergence of a trained, skilled and rationally effective bureaucracy. Someone of quite a different political and theoretical background, Marx, agreed with him on this point. Marx wrote in the *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* about the growth of state power in France, which he saw as typical of the modern state. He described how through socialism, eventually the state would be abolished and society would govern itself without a specialised apparatus of repression. Weber, on the contrary, believed that socialism would need even more officials to administer a collectivised economy and society.

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## 1.6 THE LEGITIMATE USE OF POWER

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The point is that, although the state depends on force, it does not rest on force alone. Here, the notion of the legitimate use of power comes in. Power, in general, and so the power of the state, can be exercised in different ways. Coercion is one form of power and perhaps the easiest to understand, but it is not the only one. Not all power relations are to be understood on the basis of the same crude model. If a lecturer through force of argument and breadth of knowledge helps students to form their ideas, such a person exercises a kind of power, though not against the students' will. More to the point, all holders of power try to get those who are subject to their rule to believe in the rightness and justness of the power they wield. This attempt at justification in order to make people consent constitutes the process of legitimation. One can refer to such justified or accepted power as 'authority' to distinguish it from such power as is obeyed only because of a fear of sanctions. In such a situation of legitimate power, or authority, people obey because they think it is right to do so. They believe, for whatever reason, that the power-holders are entitled to their dominant role. They have the legitimate authority, a right to command. In the words of one recent analyst of power, 'Legitimate authority is a power relation in which the power holder possesses an acknowledged right to command, and the power subject, an acknowledged obligation to obey.'

### 1.6.1 Max Weber on Legitimation

According to Weber, there are three types of legitimation, i.e. three methods by which the wielding of power can be justified. The first type pertains to traditional domination. There, power is justified because the holders of power can appeal to tradition and habit; authority has always been vested in them personally or in their families. The second type is charismatic legitimation. People obey the power-holder because of the exceptional personal qualities displayed by the leader. Finally, the third type is of the legal-rational kind. People obey certain persons who are authorized by specific rules to command in strictly defined spheres of action. One might also say that the first two types are of a personal nature, while the legal-rational type shows a procedural character. As such it corresponds to the modern conception of political authority. It is, as Weber says, 'domination as exercised by the modern "servant of the state" and by all those bearers of power who in this respect resemble him.' It is obvious that the power-holders in any system will wish to have their power accepted as legitimate. Seen from their point of view, such an acceptance will permit a considerable 'economy' in the use of force. People will obey freely and voluntarily. The means of coercion, then, will not need to be constantly displayed; they can rather be concentrated on those who do not accept the legitimacy of the power structure. In any political

system, there will be those who comply with the rules only because non-compliance will be punished. Clearly, however, the stability of any political system is enhanced to the degree that people voluntarily obey the rules or laws because they accept the legitimacy of the established order. Hence, they recognize the authority of those empowered by the rules to issue commands. In reality, all political systems are maintained through a combination of consent and coercion.

### 1.6.2 Legitimation: Central Concern of Political Science

These are the reasons because of which, as C. Wright Mills puts it, 'The idea of legitimation is one of the central conceptions of political science.' The study of politics is centrally concerned with the methods by which holders of power try to get their power justified, and with the extent to which they succeed. It is crucial in studying any political system to investigate the degree to which people accept the existing power structure as legitimate, and thus, how much the structure rests on consent as distinct from coercion. It is also important to ascertain the actual justifications of power, which are offered; that is to say, the methods by which a system of power is legitimised. This, as the elitist theorist Mosca points out, is the 'political formula' of any political system. The question of legitimacy, furthermore, is highly important in dealing with the topics of stability and change of political systems. Consent may be granted or withdrawn. It is true that political systems can survive in situations where large sections of the population cease to accord any legitimacy to the system. The case of South Africa may be cited as an example; similarly, that of Poland, where it seemed that the Jaruzelski regime had little legitimacy in the eyes of substantial popular elements. The point is that in such a situation, a regime has to rely mainly on force. It then finds itself in a more precarious position, vulnerable and open to the impact of fortuitous events. The system may survive for quite a time. However, once it rests on force far more than on consent, one condition for a revolutionary change presents itself.

### 1.6.3 Process of 'Delegitimation'

This explains why a revolution is often preceded by a period when the dominating ideas of the system are subjected to sustained criticism. One may call this a process of 'delegitimation' whereby the ideas, which justify the existing structure of power, come under attack. Long before the fall of the ancient regime in France, the ideas of *Divine Right* and of autocracy were ridiculed and refuted by the philosophers, the critics of the absolute state. Such a movement of delegitimation contributed to undermine the foundations of the old order. It prepared the way for its revolutionary overthrow. A case in point in modern times would be the fate of the Weimar Republic when large sections of the German population lost confidence in the democratic regime and, fearing a communist alternative, gave their support to Hitler's National-Socialist party. The result was the fall of the republic without much of a struggle. Similar causes had similar effects all over the European Continent. Many western systems of liberal democracy were overthrown and replaced by fascist or semi-fascist authoritarian systems as happened in Italy, Spain, Austria and Hungary. The conclusion, in a general sense, must be that any system loses its stability once it ceases to enjoy legitimacy in the eyes of its subjects. Finally, it must be noted that even in normal times, processes of legitimation and delegitimation are permanent features of any political system. The process of legitimation is carried on in more or less subtle



ways through many channels available for the legitimisation of the existing order. Legitimising ideas are absorbed from the earliest stages of education, diffused through a variety of forms of social interaction, and spread especially through the influence of the press, television and other mass media. Views, which are accepted or considered to be within the boundaries of the system, are almost forced on readers, listeners and viewers. Action, which goes beyond those limits, is presented as illegitimate. Being made to look very unattractive blocks off a range of political alternatives.

#### **1.6.4 Manipulated Consent**

There are still more effective methods available to prevent subversive ideas from even arising. They may be intercepted at source, the source being the conscious and even the subconscious mind. An important dimension of power is the capacity to affect and mould people's consciousness so that they will accept the existing state of affairs without ever becoming aware of alternative possibilities. Consent, then, becomes manipulated consent. To a certain extent we are all affected by the prevailing 'climate of opinion'. From there an ascending scale leads to a position where the moulding of minds, manipulation, is made the deliberate purpose of the state in order to create a monolithic popular mentality. Such was the purpose of Goebbels' propaganda machine in Nazi Germany and this is still, the purpose of any totalitarian regime. Manipulation is 'power wielded unknown to the powerless', as C. Wright Mills defines it. Peter Worsley points out that 'the mechanisms by which consciousness is manipulated are of growing importance in modern society.' In Marxist language, such manipulated consent would eventually produce a 'false consciousness'. Against that, it could be argued that where people are free to choose and to express their choice as in liberal-democratic systems, the manipulation of consciousness is not possible. Manipulation can only occur where free choice does not exist, as in one-party systems. It is also argued that wherever people are free to choose, but do not in fact choose an alternative to the existing order—for example, by supporting parties committed to radical changes—it is safe to assume that the existing structure of society is broadly 'what people want'. This would lead to the conclusion that the importance of political choice and the ability to freely express that choice cannot be overrated. However, 'what people want' is to some extent conditioned by various factors. Choice does not take place in a vacuum. In short, the choice itself cannot be considered as completely free from the impact of a process of legitimisation.

#### **1.6.5 Personnel of the State Machine: The Elite**

From the short survey we have so far made of political problems, a few points of importance emerge which will recur in the following discussion. They chiefly stem from the fact that state power is structured or broken up, so to speak, into distinct sectors. It has already been mentioned that the specific relationship of the various sectors is determined by the political system within which they operate. The internal structure, say, of a communist state. A further question involves the personnel of these sectors. The state, after all, is not a machine; though the phrase 'machinery of the state' may be used. The state is a set of institutions staffed by people whose ideas and basic attitudes are largely influenced by their origin and social environment. The composition of the state elite is an important problem in the study of politics. J.A.C. Griffith in *The Politics*

*of the Judiciary*, exemplifies what is meant by the term ‘state elite’ with reference to a study done earlier. It shows that in Britain, ‘in broad terms, four out of five full-time professional judges are products of the elite. It is not surprising that while discussing ‘judicial opinion about political cases’, Griffith finds ‘a remarkable consistency of approach in these cases concentrated in a fairly narrow part of the spectrum of political opinion.’

It must be noted here that from different theoretical points of view, different answers will be given to the question as to how decisive the nature and composition of the state elite are. Elitist theories accord the highest importance to this factor. In their perspective, the nature of a political system is best explained by an analysis of its elite, that ruling minority, which controls the state apparatus. In this perspective, almost everything depends on the talents and abilities of the leaders. A low quality of leadership will have disastrous consequences. For that reason, Max Weber was much concerned with the nature of Germany’s political leadership. He was in favour of a strong parliament, which, he believed, would provide an adequate training ground to produce leaders willing and capable of responsible action. Alternatively, leadership would fall into the hands of the bureaucracy whose training and life style made them unsuitable material for creative leadership. Marxist theories would view the matter differently. They would accord less importance to the nature of the state elite. The argument would rather be that the purpose and the aims of state activity are determined less by the elite, but far more by the social context and the economic framework within which the state system is located. This structure is of greater significance, in this view, than the character of the personnel that staff the state machine. Generally, ‘structural’ theories would emphasize the constraints on the government stemming from the social structures within which the government has to operate. Nevertheless, the two types of interpretation need not be mutually exclusive. This brings us to a final question, which deals with the relation of state and society. The phrase, which Marx applied to the Bonapartist state, that its power was not ‘suspended mid-air’, can be generalised to apply to all types of state systems. Then, several problems present themselves. How does the power structure of society affect and constrain the political leaders? To what extent does the state interfere to maintain and legitimise or, alternatively, mitigate the inequalities of the social system? To what extent indeed is ‘civil society’ independent of the state? For some theorists, the concept of ‘totalitarianism’ is meant to suggest a situation where society is totally controlled by state power and, therefore, has no independence at all.

**Check Your Progress 3**

**Note:** i) Use the space given below for your answer.

ii) See the end of the unit for tips for your answer.

1) What is understood by politics as a vocation?

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2) What is legitimation? What are Max Weber’s views on it?

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3) What is deligitimation?

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4) How is consent manipulated?

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### 1.7 LET US SUM UP

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It may be conceded that understanding the political means understanding the needs, objectives and goals of human life. It is related with the political activities of human beings. Politics is the game of power. Various players play this game at the same time and compete with each other. The state forms the central point of this whole activity, since in the national affairs it is within the state and in the international affairs, it is among the states. The state is authorized for the legitimate use of power. Authority is the right to rule. Authority is a broader notion than power. The dictates of the situation mean the understanding of the political. It is the product of a situational event. The rise of modern nation state has given stability to international system but there are a number of challenges that are before today’s nations. Some communities are scattered over many parts but feel united based on common culture, language or religion. For ex, Kurds are scattered over Iraq, Syria and Turkey but demand a separate state. There have been opposite examples as well, where various ethnic groups formed a state but were not able to assimilate as a nation, for ex former Soviet Union. Then there are issues of people who have migrated to other countries and have become naturalized citizens but they continue to have links with countries of their origin. There are non-traditional threats like terrorism, climate change, drug trafficking, food security etc which cannot be tackled by a country alone but require cooperative security. This would also require that states cede some

of their authority and sovereignty in the larger interest of humanity. Hence, the modern nation state needs to address these issues to stay relevant in changing times.

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## 1.8 REFERENCES

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## 1.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

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### Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Your answer should highlight how politics is an all pervasive activity permeating every section of society
- 2) Your answer should highlight it is a collective activity, assumes diversity of views/goals and means, reconciliation of differences through discussion/persuasion, collective and authoritative decision making and an inescapable feature of human condition

### Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Your answer should highlight popular perception – rivalries of politicians in their struggle for power, relationship between states on an international level and meaning of power especially with reference to Max Weber’s views
- 2) Your answer should mention the name of his book and discuss the elements of state described in it
- 3) Your answer should mention the sequence of emergence of different forms of state, Treaty of Westphalia and the Liberal and Marxist perspective of state

### Check Your Progress 3

- 1) Your answer should highlight views of Max Weber as given in his lecture ‘Politics as a Vocation’, Marx’s views on state in the ‘Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte’
- 2) Your answer should define legitimation and discuss Weber’s three types of legitimation
- 3) Your answer should define it and give examples from history
- 4) Your answer should highlight mechanisms for manipulating consent

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## **UNIT 2 WHAT IS POLITICAL THEORY?\***

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### **Structure**

- 2.0 Objectives
- 2.1 Introduction
- 2.2 Political Theory and Other Interrelated Terms
- 2.3 Development in Political Theory
- 2.4 Towards Definition of Political Theory
- 2.5 Importance of Key Theoretical Concepts
  - 2.5.1 Is Political Theory Dead?
  - 2.5.2 Revival of Political Theory
- 2.6 Approaches in Political Theory
  - 2.6.1 Historical Approach
  - 2.6.2 Normative Approach
  - 2.6.3 Empirical Approach
  - 2.6.4 Contemporary Approach
- 2.7 Let Us Sum Up
- 2.8 References
- 2.9 Answers to Check Your Progress Exercises

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### **2.0 OBJECTIVES**

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This unit concerns itself with the need for political theory. After going through this unit, you should be able to:

- Distinguish political theory from other similar terms;
- Examine whether political theory is dead; and
- Know various approaches to study political theory.

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### **2.1 INTRODUCTION**

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Political theory is one of the core areas in political science. It is only in recent times that it has emerged as an academic discipline. Earlier, those who engaged in this enterprise styled themselves as philosophers or scientists. Political theory is the most appropriate term to employ in designating that intellectual tradition which affirms the possibility of transcending the sphere of immediate practical concerns and ‘viewing’ man’s societal existence from a critical perspective. Political theory was political science in the full sense, and there could be no science without theory. So, political theory may legitimately and accurately be used as synonymous with political science.

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\* Contributed by Dr. Rajendra Dayal & Dr. Satish Kumar Jha, University of Delhi, Delhi, adapted from Units 3&4, EPS-11

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## 2.2 POLITICAL THEORY AND OTHER INTERRELATED TERMS

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A distinction can be made between political theory and similar terms like political science, political philosophy and political ideology, though many treat them interchangeably. The differentiation between political theory and political science arises because of the general shift in intellectual perceptions brought about by modern science. Political Science has tried to provide plausible generalisations and laws about politics and political behaviour. Political theory reflects upon political phenomenon, processes and institutions and on actual political behaviour by subjecting it to philosophical or ethical criterion. It considers the question of the best political order, which is a part of a larger and a more fundamental question; namely, the ideal form of life that a human being ought to lead within a larger community. In the process of answering immediate and local questions, it addresses perennial issues, which is why a study of the classical texts form an important component of the discipline. A classic in political theory has the essential ingredients of a great literary work, which in spite of its local setting, deals with the perennial problems of life and society. It contains the quintessence of eternal knowledge and is an inheritance not of any one culture, place, people or time, but of the entire humankind.

Specific political theories cannot be considered as the correct or final understanding of an event. The meaning of an event is always open to future interpretations from new viewpoints, each explaining and analysing from a particular standpoint or concern in political life. Furthermore, political theory is critical in its endeavour, for it gives an account of politics that rises above those of ordinary people. There is no tension between political theory and political science, for they differ in terms of their boundaries and jurisdiction, and not in their aim. Political theory supplies ideas, concepts and theories for the purpose of analysis, description, explanation and criticism, which in turn are incorporated in political science.

Political philosophy provides general answers to questions such as what is justice, concepts of right, the distinction between 'is' and 'ought' and the larger issues of politics. Political philosophy is a part of normative political theory, for it attempts to establish inter-relationships between concepts. It is, perhaps, accurate to say that every political philosopher is a theorist, though every political theorist is not a political philosopher. Political philosophy is a complex activity, which is best, understood by analysing the many ways that the acknowledged masters have practiced it. No single philosopher and no one historical age can be said to have defined it conclusively, any more than any one painter or school of painting has practiced all that we mean by painting.

Political thought is the thought of the whole community that includes the writings and speeches of the articulate sections such as professional politicians, political commentators, society reformers and ordinary persons of a community. Thought can be in the form of political treatises, scholarly articles, speeches, government policies and decisions, and also poems and prose that capture the anguish of the people. Thought is time bound; for instance, the history of the twentieth century. In short, political thought includes theories that attempt to explain political behaviour, and values to evaluate it and methods to control it.

Political theory, unlike thought, refers to the speculation by a single individual, usually articulated in treatises as models of explanation. It consists of theories of institutions, including that of the state, law, representation and of election. The mode of enquiry is comparative and explanatory. Political theory attempts to explain the attitudes and actions arising from ordinary political life and to generalise about them in a particular context: this political theory is concerned about/with the relationships between concepts and circumstances. Political philosophy attempts to resolve or to understand conflicts between political theories, which might appear equally acceptable in given circumstances.

Political ideology is a systematic and all embracing doctrine, which attempts to give a complete and universally applicable theory of human nature and society along with a detailed programme of attaining it. John Locke is often described as the father of modern ideologies. Marxism is also a classic example of an ideology summed up in the statement that the purpose of philosophy is to change and not merely interpret the world. All political ideology is political philosophy, though the reverse is not true. The twentieth century has seen many ideologies like Fascism, Nazism, Communism and Liberalism. A distinctive trait of political ideology is its dogmatism, which unlike political philosophy, precludes and discourages critical appraisal because of its aim to realise the perfect society. According to Germino and Sabine, political ideology is a negation of political theory because an ideology is of recent origin, and under the influence of positivism is based on subjective, unverifiable value preferences. Germino, furthermore, distinguishes a political theorist from a publicist. According to him while the former has a profound understanding of issues, the latter is concerned with immediate questions.

Furthermore, Germino, like Plato has distinguished between opinion and knowledge and the latter being the starting point of a political theorist. Every political theorist has a dual role; that of a scientist and a philosopher and the way he divides his roles will depend on his temperament and interests. Only by combining the two roles can he contribute to knowledge in a worthwhile manner. The scientific component of a theory can appear coherent and significant, if the author has a preconceived notion of the aims of political life. The philosophical basis is revealed in the manner in which reality is depicted.

Political theory is dispassionate and disinterested. As a science, it describes political reality without trying to pass judgement on what is being depicted either implicitly or explicitly. As a philosophy, it prescribes rules of conduct which will secure a good life for all in the society and not simply for certain individuals or classes. The theorist, will not himself have a personal interest in the political arrangements of any one country or class or party. Devoid of such an interest, his vision of reality and his image of the good life will not be clouded, nor will his theory be special. The intention of an ideology is to justify a particular system of power in society. The ideologue is an interested party : his interest may be to defend things as they are or to criticise the status –quo in the hope that a new distribution of power will come into being. Rather than disinterested prescription, we have rationalisation. Rather than dispassionate description, we have a distorted picture of reality.

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## 2.3 DEVELOPMENTS IN POLITICAL THEORY

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Developments in political theory always reflect the changes which occur in society. Political theories are produced in response to the challenges which emerge at different times. Hegel's symbolic characterisation of political theory as 'the owl of Minerva takes flight when shadow of darkness falls' is very apt. However, we will do well to remember that political thought, which also emerges due to societal challenges, is bound by time as well as space, and is therefore, different from theory which breaks such barriers and proves its worth in understanding and explaining political phenomena of different nature and origin. This happens, because theories are purged and purified from ideologies and biases and arrive at certain principles, which are not only timeless, but may even be called knowledge. Political theorists, while indulging in theorisation, pursue ideas not for the sake of fulfillment of their fads and fantasies, but in order to search those principles whose understanding can make life better. And in this enterprise, theorists, by and large, are motivated by the concrete political situation. The history of political theory bears out how ills and maladies afflicting societies have lubricated the tools of theorisation, through which various accepted principles and practices and the assumptions behind them were questioned and the blueprint for the future was drawn. It is, however, true that the stimulus for theory always comes from some sort of failure and a related conviction that things can be bettered through an improved understanding and may, ultimately be resolved. Hence, political theory's task is not limited to providing a fleeting response and getting contented with a compromise. Rather, it has to reach at the root of the problem and has to discover remedies in the form of an alternative set of principles. Hence, any project on theory requires a 'vision' through which a theorist could think not only about the problems at hand, but also beyond them. It is here that political theory might be differentiated from art or poetry. In terms of vision, reflections and ruminations, there is not much difference between political theory and other creative activities like art and poetry. But what sets apart the political theorist from the poet is that his urge and search are a conscious act with a definite design, whereas a poetic act is one of spontaneity. Therefore, it is not creativity, but consciousness that denies poetry the status of a theory.

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## 2.4 TOWARDS A DEFINITION OF POLITICAL THEORY

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Political theory is defined in different ways by different people. The definitions vary on the basis of emphasis and understanding of its constitutive elements. Sabine's well known definition of political theory is that it is something 'which has characteristically contained factors like the factual, the causal and the valuational'. To Hecker, political theory is 'dispassionate and disinterested activity. It is a body of philosophical and scientific knowledge which regardless of when and where it was originally written, can increase our understanding of the world in which we live today and we live tomorrow'. Therefore, one may say that what we mean by political theory is a coherent group of propositions, with some explanatory principle, about a class of political phenomena. It implies that a theory unlike thought, cannot consider a multitude of phenomena at a time, and will have to get concerned with a class or type of issues only.



**Check Your Progress 1**

**Note:** i) Use the space given below for your answer.

ii) See the end of the unit for tips for your answer.

1) What do you understand by political theory?

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2) Distinguish political theory from other inter-related terms.

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**2.5 IMPORTANCE OF KEY THEORETICAL CONCEPTS**

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A reader getting introduced to political theory for the first time may think it sufficient to study the institutions rather than abstract concepts in order to understand the character and nature of society. While a study of institutions is possible, one has to realise that institutional arrangements vary from society to society because they are based on divergent sets of ideas. This realisation takes us to the heart of the matter as to what is more important, reality or ideas, facts or concepts. Do ideas reflect reality or is reality based on ideas?

**2.5.1 Is Political Theory Dead?**

In the middle of the twentieth century, many observers readily wrote an obituary of political theory. Some spoke of its decline. Others proclaimed its death. One referred to political theory as being in the doghouse. This dismal view is because the classical tradition in political theory is, by and large, loaded with value judgements beyond the control of empirical testing. The criticism of normative theory came from logical positivists in the 1930s and from behaviouralism, subsequently. Easton contends that since political theory is concerned with some kind of historical form, it had lost its constructive role. He blames William Dunning, Charles H. McIlwain, and George M. Sabine for historicism in political theory. This kind of political theory has dissuaded students from a serious study of value theory and rejects elements of history and philosophy in political theory.

Easton examined the reasons for the decline of political theory in general and its decline into historicism in particular. First, and foremost, is the tendency among

political scientists to conform to the moral propositions of their age leading to a loss of the constructive approach. The emphasis is to uncover and reveal one's values which imply that there is no longer the need to enquire into the merit of these moral values, but merely understand their 'origins, development and social impact'. History is used to endorse existing values. Secondly, moral relativism is responsible for the attention a theory received with history. Overall, he gave four reasons for decline of political theory – historicism, moral relativism, hyperfactualism and positivism.

## 2.5.2 Revival of Political Theory

In the 1930s, political theory began studying the history of ideas with the purpose of defending liberal democratic theory in opposition to the totalitarian tenets of communism, fascism and nazism. Lasswell tried to establish a scientific political theory with the eventual purpose of controlling human behaviour, furthering the aims and direction given by Merriam. Unlike the classical tradition, scientific political theory describes rather than prescribes. Political theory in the traditional sense was alive in the works of Arendt, Theodore Adorno, Marcuse, and Leo Strauss. Their views diametrically differed from the broad ideas within American political science for they believed in liberal democracy, science and historical progress. All of them reject political messianism and utopianism in politics. Arendt focussed mainly on the uniqueness and responsibility of the human being, with which she initiates her criticism in behaviouralism. She contended that the behavioural search for uniformities in human nature has only contributed towards stereotyping the human being.

Strauss reaffirms the importance of classical political theory to remedy the crisis of the modern times. He does not agree with the proposition that all political theory is ideological in nature mirroring a given socio-economic interest, for most political thinkers are motivated by the possibility of discerning the principles of the right order in social existence. A political philosopher has to be primarily interested in truth. Past philosophies are studied with an eye on coherence and consistency. The authors of the classics in political theory are superior because they were geniuses and measured in their writings. Strauss scrutinises the methods and purposes of the 'new' political science and concludes that it was defective when compared with classical political theory, particularly that of Aristotle. For Aristotle, a political philosopher or a political scientist has to be impartial, for he possesses a more comprehensive and clearer understanding of human ends. Political science and political philosophy are identical, because science consisting of theoretical and practical aspects is identical with philosophy. Aristotle's political science also evaluates political things, defends autonomy of prudence in practical matters and views political action as essentially ethical. These premises Behaviouralism denies, for it separates political philosophy from political science and substitutes the distinction between theoretical and practical sciences. It perceives applied sciences to be derived from theoretical sciences, but not in the same manner as the classical tradition visualises. Behaviouralism like positivism is disastrous, for it denies knowledge regarding ultimate principles. Their bankruptcy is evident, for they seem helpless, unable to distinguish the right from the wrong, the just from the unjust in view of the rise of totalitarianism. Strauss counters Easton's charge of historicism by alleging that the new science is responsible for the decline in political theory, for it pointed to and abetted the general political crisis of the West because of its overall neglect of normative

issues. Vogelín regards political science and political theory as inseparable and that one is not possible without the other. Political theory is not ideology, utopia or scientific methodology, but an experiential science of the right order in both the individual and society. It has to dissect critically and empirically the problem of order. Theory is not just any opining about human existence in society, it rather is an attempt at formulating the meaning of existence by explicating the content of a definitive class of experiences. Its argument is not arbitrary, but derives its validity from the aggregate of experiences to which it must permanently refer for empirical control.

**Check Your Progress 2**

**Note:** i) Use the space given below for your answer.

ii) See the end of the unit for tips for your answer.

1) Examine the debate about relevance of political theory.

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**2.6 APPROACHES IN POLITICAL THEORY**

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It is quite difficult to identify and categorise various conceptions of political theory which are put into use by theorists. The difficulty emanates from a tendency among theorists to go for an exercise in which they start drawing on different conceptions and traditions. This is truer, as we will see later, with contemporary political theory than with the ones which preceded it. In the past, theorists somewhat maintained a purity of conception in theory – building and seldom out stepped the framework they had chosen. But this does not apply to the contemporary times, which are a witness to a crop of theory which appears hybrid in nature. But broadly speaking, three different conceptions emerge in political theory on the basis of which both the past and the present theories can be conceptualised, judged and evaluated. They are: Historical, Normative, and Empirical.

**2.6.1 Historical Approach**

Many theorists have attempted theory – building on the basis of insights and resources from history. Sabine is one of the main exponents of the historical conception. In his opinion, a question such as what is the nature of political theory can be answered descriptively; that is, how theory has responded to historical events and specific situations. In other words, in this perspective, political theory becomes situation dependent in which each historical situation sets a problem, which in turn is taken care of through solutions devised by the theory. This conception of political theory is deferential to tradition. Cobban also believes that the traditional mode, in which a sense of history is instilled to the full, is the right way to consider the problems of political theory. It is true that the past acts as a valuable guide in our endeavour of theory – building and

teaches us not to be too sure of our originality. It also hints that it is possible to think in ways other than those which are fashionable and dominant, besides shedding light on the sources. The historical understanding also sensitises us about the failings of the past generations and ties them with the collective wisdom of the present and promotes imaginativeness in us.

Over and above this, the historical conception also contributes significantly to our normative vision. The history of ideas may tell us that our social and political universe is a product of things whose roots lie in the past. And knowing them better would tell us how we have certain values, norms and moral expectations and from where they have come. With this sense in us, it is possible to interrogate these values and critically assess their utility. But a blind adherence to this conception is not without its folly. The novelty of the project called political theory is that each specific situation is unique, riddled with new challenges. Hence, worth of the past sometimes becomes redundant and could even be a hindrance, if one is oblivious of this aspect. Therefore, the utility of this approach in political theory beyond a certain level is doubtful as it is always wedded to outmoded ideas from outmoded ages. The suggestive values of the ideas remain, but the theoretical function recedes considerably.

### 2.6.2 Normative Approach

The normative conception in political theory is known by different names. Some people prefer to call it philosophical theory, while others refer to it as ethical theory. The normative conception is based on the belief that the world and its events can be interpreted in terms of logic, purpose and ends with the help of the theorist's intuition, reasoning, insights and experiences. In other words, it is a project of philosophical speculation about values. The questions, which are asked by the normativists, would be: what should be the end of political institutions? What should inform the relationship between the individual and other social organisations? What arrangements in society can become model or ideal and what rules and principles should govern it? One may say that their concerns are moral and the purpose is to build an ideal type. Hence, it is these theorists who have always conceived 'utopia' in the realm of political ideas through their powerful imagination. Normative political theory leans heavily towards political philosophy, because it derives its knowledge of the good life from it and also uses it as a framework in its endeavour to create absolute norms. In fact, their tools of theorisation are borrowed from political philosophy and therefore, they always seek to establish inter-relationships among concepts and look for coherence in the phenomena as well as in their theories, which are typical examples of a philosophical outlook. Leo Strauss has strongly advocated the case for normative theory and has argued that political things by nature are subject to approval or disapproval and it is difficult to judge them in any other terms, except as good or bad and justice or injustice. But the problem with the normativists is that while professing values which they cherish, they portray them as universal and absolute. They do not realise that their urge to create absolute standard for goodness is not without pitfalls. Ethical values are relative to time and space with a heavy subjective content in them, which precludes the possibility of any creation of absolute standard. We will do well to remember that even a political theorist is a subjective instrument in the assessment of the world and these insights are conditioned by many factors, which may be ideological in nature. The exponents of empirical theory criticise normativism for:

- a) Relativity of values
- b) Cultural basis of ethics and norms
- c) Ideological content in the enterprise and
- d) Abstract and utopian nature of the project.

But in the distant past those who championed normative theory always tried to connect their principles with the understanding of the reality of their times. In recent times, again the old sensibility within the normative theory has re-emerged and the passion for good life and good society has been matched by methodological and empirical astuteness. John Rawls' *A Theory of Justice* is a case in point which attempts to anchor logical and moral political theory in empirical findings. Rawls, with his imagination, creates 'original position' to connect normative philosophical arguments with real world concerns about distributive justice and the welfare state.

### 2.6.3 Empirical Approach

What has dominated political theory in the twentieth century is not normativism, but another conception known as empirical political theory which derives theories from empirical observations. Empirical political theory refuses to accord the status of knowledge to those theories which indulge in value judgements. Naturally, therefore, normative political theory is debunked as a mere statement of opinion and preferences. The drive for value – free theory started in order to make the field of political theory scientific and objective and hence, a more reliable guide for action. This new orientation came to be known as *positivism*. Under the spell of positivism, political theorists set out to attain scientific knowledge about political phenomena based on the principle which could be empirically verified and proved. Thus, they attempted to create a natural science of society and in this endeavour; philosophy was made a mere adjunct of science. Such an account of theory also portrayed the role of a theorist as of a disinterested observer, purged of all commitments and drained of all values.

This empirical project in political theory was premised on the empiricist theory of knowledge which claims to have the full blown criteria to test what constitutes truth and falsehood. The essence of this criterion is lodged in the experimentation and the verification principle. When political theory was reeling under this influence, a so called revolution started and became popular as 'Behavioural Revolution'. This revolution reached a commanding position within political theory in the 1950's and engulfed the entire field of study and research by advocating new features. They included :

- a) Encouragement to quantitative technique in analysis
- b) Demolition of the normative framework and promotion of empirical research which can be susceptible to statistical tests
- c) Non-acceptance and rejection of the history of ideas
- d) Focus on micro-study as it was more amenable to empirical treatment
- e) Glorification of specialisation
- f) Procurement of data from the behaviour of the individual and
- g) Urge for value-free research.

In fact, the behavioural climate got surcharged by an anti-theory mood and those who lambasted theory in a conventional sense had a field day. Theory was caricatured and made synonymous with ideology, abstraction, metaphysics and utopia. Some adventurists even advocated farewell to theory as an enterprise. In the zeal of attaining objective knowledge, they even reduced thought to an aspect of reality and blurred the distinction between thought and reality. Thus, they soon attracted the ire and fire of some philosophers of science who offered a vision for a post-positivist approach to science. Karl Popper set the new mood by laying down the principle of ‘falsification’ as a criterion of scientific knowledge and argued that all knowledge was conjectural, tentative and far from the final truth. The real turn or breakthrough came in the philosophy of science when Thomas Kuhn, Imre Lakatos and Mary Hesse blasted the so called scientific theory. Kuhn’s book *The Structure of Scientific Revolution* was a pioneer in bringing out the shortcomings and failures of the positivist theory and it demonstrated how all cognitions were dependent on understanding and interpretation as a means of inter-subjective communication. Kuhn cogently argued that it was not only the irrational conventions which lurked behind the construction of the semantic framework, but were also informed by rational discourses framed by interpretation and criticism.

**Check Your Progress 3**

**Note:** i) Use the space given below for your answer.

ii) See the end of the unit for tips for your answer.

1) Distinguish between the empirical and normative conceptions of political theory.

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**2.6.4 Contemporary Approach**

Contemporary political theory made its appearance on the intellectual scene in the 1980s and 90s, mostly as a reaction against the established traditions in theory and put the categories of Enlightenment like reason and science to which all traditions in political theory were tied, to a scathing and searching criticism. They brought in many aspects which were conquered as the foundation of truth by political theory under the scanner and set out to lay down the new principles to understand and imagine the new social and political universe which some of them put as ‘post-modern condition’. However, it would be arbitrary to yoke the various theoretical trends visible today under one broad frame of analysis. For example, discussing post-structuralism and post-modernism with communitarianism and multiculturalism together would amount to intellectual atrocity against them and their concerns and commitments. Because their history,

their normative concern as well as the theoretical apparatuses and empirical referents have a significant dissimilarity and diversion. But still one can layout the theoretical terrain on which their engagement with political theory takes place. The broad thrusts which bring many of the contemporary theorists and theories together could be put under the following:

a) **Opposition to Universalism**

Political theorisation in contemporary times has gone for subjecting the universal claims of political theory of yesteryears, irrespective of the tradition to which they belonged, to critical scrutiny. Liberal universalism has appeared to them as devoid of a social and temporal context and in their opinion, the hidden ‘particularism’ mostly based on the experience of western society has masqueraded as universal values and norms. They argue that the appeal to universal principles is tantamount to standardisation; hence, violative of justice which may be inherent in a particular community or form of life and which may embody its own values and normative principle. The communitarian theory and the multicultural theory in recent times have highlighted it quite forcefully and called this so called universalist theories as ‘exclusivist’ at the core, which has always presented one vision of ‘good’ as the only vision of mankind.

b) **Critique of Grand Narratives**

The grand narratives of both the liberal and the Marxist variety have come under fire on the premise that there is an overarching or transcendental ‘foundation’ of reality and truth. Some of the contemporary theories have been declared ‘anti-foundational’, because of the continuous contestation of all well accepted foundations in political theory, viz, state, sovereignty and power. In all fairness to them, they do not reject all foundations, but only transcendental ones. The post-modernists are in the forefront in attacking the grand narratives and argue that there is nothing like objective pre-given reality or an objective social good which can support such grand narratives and their designs.

c) **Post-positivism**

It is reminiscent of the earlier engagement with value neutrality in social science once championed by the behaviouralists in political theory. The contemporary theories call value-free enterprises as useless and believe that political theory is an inherently normative and politically engaged project, which is supposed to offer prescription and a vision for the future.

d) **Empirical and Comparative**

The post-positivist thrust among contemporary theorists do not stop them from advocating the need for empirical and comparative approaches before any generalization attempt is made. Multiculturalism is one such example, which is sensitive to the context. In fact, this kind of empirical – comparative methodology would be a check on the broad generalisation across cultures and continents. In spite of the new insights which come from contemporary political theory, they suffer from many weaknesses. Unlike classical political theory, there is not much comparative – empirical inquiry as yet and the tendency among theorists to borrow from the other theorists is galore. The normative enterprise can be useful only when it is tied to reality. Therefore,

the real challenge lies in grounding normative theory to empirical reality of society and politics. This is the only way a valid political theory with just generalisations can emerge, which would also overcome the limitation of the post-modernist perspective and its weaknesses of relativity and diffusion which are not always congenial for political projects. This may fructify what Sheldon Wolin calls ‘epic theory’.

**Check Your Progress 4**

**Note:** i) Use the space given below for your answer.

ii) See the end of the unit for tips for your answer.

- 1) Discuss some of the broad thrusts which bring contemporary theorists together.

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**2.7 LET US SUM UP**

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Since we have different conceptions of political theory, they acquire different meanings in different traditions. We have seen why political theory emerges and how it shapes and decides the course of history by facilitating human intervention in politics. What are the different conceptions held by the theorists have also been discussed and their pitfalls highlighted. The contemporary enterprise, which claims to open new vistas in our understanding of social and political reality, has been discussed along with its limitations. What emerges clearly from the preceding discussion is that philosophy and science cannot replace each other in the project called political theory, if a vision for the emancipation of mankind is the mission and that even in the absence of anything called objective ‘good’ or objective ‘truth’, the practical basis for theory should be attempted. It is not only desirable, but also derivable. Any project in political theory which unifies empirical findings with normative thinking by subjecting them to rigorous criticism can open the gate for creativity in political theory on the basis of which we can navigate into the future.

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**2.8 REFERENCES**

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## 2.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

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### Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Your answer should highlight the following points:
  - How political theory is synonymous with political science
  - Discuss inter-relationship of political theory and political philosophy
  - Elaborate on Hegel's quote on political theory
  - Variations in defining political theory.
- 2) Your answer should explain how it is different from political science, political thought and political ideology.

### Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Examine the debate on whether political theory is dead and also discuss views of Levi Strauss.

### Check Your Progress 3

- 1) Your answer should highlight the fact-value dichotomy and mention their strengths and weaknesses.

### Check Your Progress 4

- 1) Highlight opposition to universalism, critique of grand narratives, Post-positivism and focus on empirical and comparative.