Western Political Thought and Theories

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Preface

Political philosophy, as a structured science, originated in ancient Greece. The word 'politics' is derived from the Greek word *"polis"*, or city-states. The "sophists" or the wandering wise men in the 5th century B.C. challenged the legitimacy of the polis with its laws and institutions, and Socrates, his disciple Plato, and Aristotle responded with philosophical arguments. The political theories of Plato and Aristotle were inextricably connected with their philosophical systems, Plato appealing to his doctrine of forms and Aristotle to a theory of biological naturalism.

Later, St. Augustine and Thomas Aquinas in the middle ages, sought to justify political authority by basing it on belief in Divine and divinely instituted natural laws. During the Renaissance, Machiavelli dismissed the Divine origin of State and classical philosophy, drawing instead on historical examples to offer practical advice to rulers.

In England, Thomas Hobbes and John Locke sought the basis for the state in a "social contract" among individuals who possessed "natural rights" in a prior "state of nature." Hobbes argued that men must enter into a social contract and surrender their natural liberties to an absolute sovereign, whereas Locke concluded that the political state must have limited powers and the citizens retain the right to revolution. Later thinkers like Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill invoked the utilitarian principle of "the greatest happiness for the greatest number," and pleaded for political reforms that tended to be increasingly democratic and egalitarian.

Meanwhile, in continental Europe there was a steady drift towards altruism and statism in the theories of Jean Jacques

Rousseau, Immanuel Kant, Hegel, and Karl Marx. Hegel and Marx both viewed political phenomena as the inevitable result of historical processes, and regarded collectives as of greater reality and value than their individual members.

The political philosophy was neglected for some time. However, in the early 1970s a revival of political theorizing was inaugurated by two philosophers employing techniques of analytical philosophy to defend opposing political theories: John Rawls a neo-Kantian form of welfare liberalism, and Robert Nozick a neo-Lockean version of libertarianism.

The book will look into major themes and theories of the 20th century. The century is marked by certain major events like World War II and collapse of communism. Each event challenged a presumption of order and confronted theorists, politicians and citizens with the need to think through the implications of these events and respond to them. The book will examine different perspectives and interpretations of what are seen as central philosophical problems. The book will also discuss major works like Daniel Bell's *'End of Ideology'* and Francis Fukuyama's *'End of History and the Last Man.'*

Human beings have always been influenced by the physical environment. Through climate, weather, and agriculture, the physical environment has affected what they can and cannot do; some argue that the environment may even have been the most significant force on human activities in pre-industrial societies. However, human beings have not merely been shaped by the environment. They also played a significant role in creating the physical and ecological environments in which they live. The environment has become a pressing issue in political life globally. The last section of this book discusses the Green Political theory and its various perspectives and its importance in the current political discourse of the world.

Thus, this book focuses on the evolution of political theory over the centuries in the West and its contemporary relevance. This has been made keeping in mind the students of Political Science. The style is lucid and easy to understand. I am sure this book will be of great use to those who pursue various courses in Political Science.

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Nature and Significance of Political Theory

Origin of Political Theory

Political theory, which is a part of the philosophic-scientific thinking, began in Ancient Greece. The word 'politics' is derived from the Greek word *polis*, which means city-state. The Greece used the term *politika* to describe the totality of state phenomena. The *sophists* or the 'wandering wisemen' particularly *Protagoras* and *Gorgias* in Athens were the first to deal with this mode of thought and then expound political theory. Great philosophers like Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle continued to conduct the scientific study of the various problems concerning the state and the government. Aristotle the student of Plato is regarded as father of Political Science in the West.

However, one can trace the roots of politcal thinking, even before Plato or Aristotle, in the works of Homer, Hesiod, Thycydides, and Euripidis. In fact, Plato analyzed political systems prevalent that period and expounded an approach which was closer to philosophy. The contribution of Aristotle is that he built upon Plato's analysis to include historical empirical evidence in his analysis.

"Greece is the place where Europeans contacted the civilization of the ancient Middle East and it was there that man crossed the threshold of science, philosophy, and political theory."
                                                    — G.H. Sabine

Political theory is not related to music or artistic tradition. It is for the most part to be associated with a philosophic-scientific tradition and style of discourse. "Indeed, political theory is more often that not characterised by what has been called an 'architectonic' stance with respect to its subject matter. Thus, the political theorist stands 'outside' the edifice as an architect might. He sees it as a whole, plans its whole development, and adjusts this or that aspect with an eye to the success of the whole," states Sabine. While the study of politics is first found in the Western tradition in Greece, political science is a late addition in terms of social sciences. The discipline essentially deals with the characterstics and functions of the ideal 'state'. In each historic period and in almost every geographic area, we can find someone studying politics and increasing political understanding.

There is differnce of opinion on the meaning of the term 'state' and as to when the concept emerged. The ancient Greek city-states exhibited distinct political patterns. The Greeks and Romans were unaware of the term 'state'. City-states like Athens and Sparta were relatively small and cohesive units, in which political, religious, and cultural concerns were intertwined. The extent of their similarity to modern nation-states is controversial.

Niccolò Machiavelli was the first political thinker who introduced the concept of the State in political theory. His two famous books, *Discourses on Livy* and *The Prince*, were written in the hopes of improving the conditions of the Northern Italian principalities, but became general handbooks for political theory. *The Prince*, written to encourage the appearance of a political savior who would unify the corrupt city-states and fend off foreign conquest, advocated the theory that whatever was expedient was necessary—an example of realpolitik. Defining 'state', he writes: "All the powers which have had and have authority over men are states and are either Monarchies or Republic."

In England, Thomas Hobbes and John Locke sought the basis for the state in a "social contract" among individuals who possessed "natural rights" in a prior "state of nature." Hobbes argued that men must enter into a social contract and surrender their natural liberties to an absolute sovereign, whereas Locke opined that the state must have limited powers and the citizens retain the right to revolution. However, conservatives like David Hume and Edmund Burke, who crticised them, saw tradition as the only basis for government and law. Later British thinkers like Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill invoked the utilitarian principle and advocated political reforms that were more democratic.

Meanwhile, other European thinkers like Jean Jacques Rousseau, Immanuel Kant expounded theories of altruism and statism. Hegel and Marx both viewed political phenomena as the inevitable result of historical processes, and regarded collectives as of greater reality and value than their individual members.

Resisting the generally collectivist trend, Herbert Spencer defended capitalism against socialism by appeal to an evolutionary theory of history. Throughout most of the 20th century, political philosophy was neglected because of the rise of logical positivism and linguistic analysis, which were skeptical about the capacity of reason to apprehend objective moral truths of any sort. However, in the early 1970s a revival of political theorizing was inaugurated by two philosophers employing techniques of analytical philosophy to defend opposing political theories: John Rawls a neo-Kantian form of welfare liberalism, and Robert Nozick a neo-Lockean version of libertarianism.

Nature of Political Theory

It is very clear that there are many different approaches to studying the history of political thought. For instance, one may choose to study the theorist as a person with unique concerns and motivations (a biographical approach); or, one could study the theories themselves—locating them in their cultural contexts, accounting for their conceptual development and change, and tracing complex patterns of their influence and

impact (an historical approach). Still other approaches have focused on great problems or eternal questions presumed to face all political thinkers without regard to time, place, or circumstance (a perennial-issues approach).

Therefore political theory can be defined as the systematic effort to understand the meaning and significance of political life. Motivated by a given political or philosophical problem, one turns to the history of political theory (or even contemporary political thought and political science), and then shows its relevance to that problem. That done, the task becomes one of reflecting on the ideas offered by theorists in order to solve the problem, or at least, to clarify it in some important way. In sum, the student of political theory regards "interpretations as alternative solutions to some puzzle or problem, and then goes on to assess their adequacy *vis-à-vis* each other and in relation to one's own proposed solution." Studying political theory, then, is not simply about reading a body of authoritative texts (though it includes such authority); it is also about reflecting on the meaning of political life itself.

In a similar vein, John Nelson presented a useful list of goals for the practice of political theory. He argued that political theory's aims can be summarized in terms of three Cs: *comprehend, conserve,* and *criticize. Comprehend* here refers to the twin objectives of explanation and understanding. Theories provide a conceptual vocabulary for describing and accounting for the most important features of political life and their interrelations, as well as for accounting for the forms and behaviours typically found in political practice. Simply put, political theory explores political phenomena by placing them in the context of human experience. The second aim, to *conserve,* connotes that the historical study of political thought helps preserve a cultural heritage. Lastly, to identify *criticize* as an aim for students of political theory underscores the fact that theory analyzes and evaluates both theoretical arguments and political phenomena. To Nelson's list, we would add a fourth C: *create.* Theory shapes the way we view politics and gives insight into the problems and opportunities presented by political life. It can either restrict our vision or broaden our horizons. At all times, theorists must be aware that they are not engaging in pure philosophy, not living in a rarefied atmosphere of complete

abstraction. As Benjamin Barber has observed, politics remains something human beings *do*, not something they possess or use or watch or talk or think about. Those who would do something about it must do more than philosophize, and philosophy that is politically intelligible must take full political measure of politics as conduct.

Thus, theorists must be attuned to the political world, the world of praxis and action. They should pay heed to the specific practices, behaviors, or orders recommended or implied by the political theories under investigation. In the end, consensus on the essential definition of concepts such as politics, or of practices such as political theory, will likely elude our grasp. This does not mean, however, that conceptual definitions or political judgments are wholly subjective matters of whim or taste. Far from it. There are certain criteria good theories ought to meet, standards by which we can evaluate the political theories you will encounter in this book.

Political theory can be broadly defined as "any thinking about politics or relevant to politics". G H Sabine in his famous book titled *A History of Political Theory* writes: "Political theory is, quite simply, man's attempts to consciously understand and solve the problems of his group life and organization. Thus, political theory is an intellectual tradition and its history consists of the evolution of men's thoughts about political problems over time."

As discussed earlier, political theory as a 'disciplined' investigation started in Greece. Aristotle's word for 'politics' is *politikê*, which is the short form of *politikê epistêmê* or 'political science'. It belongs to one of the three main branches of science, which Aristotle distinguishes by their ends or objects. According to him, contemplative science (physics and metaphysics) is concerned with truth or knowledge; practical science deals with good action; and productive science relates to the production of useful objects. Politics is a practical science, since it is concerned with the noble action or happiness of the citizens (although it resembles a productive science in that it seeks to create, preserve, and reform political systems.) Aristotle thus understands politics as a normative or prescriptive discipline rather than as a purely empirical or descriptive inquiry.

In one of his works, Aristotle claims politics as the most authoritative science. It prescribes which sciences are to be studied in the city-state, and the other capacities—such as military science, household management, and rhetoric—fall under its authority. Since it governs the other practical sciences, their ends serve as means to its end, which is nothing less than the human good. "Even if the end is the same for an individual and for a city-state, that of the city-state seems at any rate greater and more complete to attain and preserve. For although it is worthy to attain it for only an individual, it is nobler and more divine to do so for a nation or city-state." Aristotle's political science encompasses the two fields which modern philosophers distinguish as ethics and political philosophy.

Aristotle in his famous book, *Politikos* writes: "Man is by nature a political animal and he, who by nature and not by mere accident is without state, is either above humanity or below it." He adds: "He who is unable to live in society or who has no need because he is sufficient for himself, must be either a beast or God." There is no dispute that the man is essentially a social animal because he cannot do without society or State. By nature and compulsion man likes to lead the life in the company of his fellow beings. Only a well-organised society can provide him with the facilities of daily life because human life is not safe and secure in a society that is not at peace with itself. Civilization and culture cannot flourish in chaos and anarchy. Order is necessary for the safety of man and security of his property. Hence, man stands in urgent need of a well-governed State. Hobbes, in his famous book *Leviathan*, sets out his doctrine of modern natural right as the foundation of societies and governments. The fear of violent death due to attack is inherent in man whether he is strong or weak. When threatened with death, man in his natural state cannot help but defend himself in any way possible. Self-defense against violent death is Hobbes' highest human necessity, and rights are borne of necessity. According to Hobbes, man forms peaceful societies by entering into a social contract. According to Hobbes, society is a population beneath an authority, to whom all individuals in that society surrender just enough of their natural right for the authority to be able to ensure internal peace and a common defense. (For more discussion on this topic, see following chapters).

However, there are many in the world who content the claim that man is a political animal. Man likes to live in society or State because he has an axe to grind. The advantages of living in the State are obvious to every person. According to the famous American thinker Robert A. Dahl, although human beings must and do live in political systems and share the benefits of political life; they do not necessarily participate in political life; they are not necessarily interested in politics, nor do they always care what happens in politics; know much about political events or share in making decisions. He says: "An individual is unlikely to get involved in Politics if he places a low valuation on the rewards to be gained from political involvement relative to the rewards expected from other kinds of human activity. For many people political activity is a good deal gratifying than other outlets-family, friends, recreation and the like. For many political involvement yields far less affection, income, security, respect, excitement, and other values than working at one's job, watching television, reading fishing, playing with the children, attending a football game or assembling a new hi-fi set. For many, the rewards of other activities are more immediate and concrete." Irrespective of whether a person takes interest in the political affairs or not, the destiny of man is linked with the State and government.

As said earlier, that political theory deals with the fundamental questions about the state, government, the ends of political action and the means of achieving them, the possibilities and necessities of political situations, property, law and the enforcement of a legal code by authority: what they are, why 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—if ever.

Political Theory and Political Thought

Important political theories have been produced during periods of social strife such as in Greece during the days of Plato and Aristotle, in England during the day of Civil War and in Europe during the days of labour unrest. But theories are produced not by crisis but by the reaction they produce on the