



# What is **Politics?**

**Edited by Adrian Leftwich**





WHAT IS POLITICS?



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The Activity and its Study

Edited by  
Adrian Leftwich

polity

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# Preface

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Adrian Leftwich

This book is based on a collection of essays on the different conceptions and understandings of politics which was published twenty years ago (Leftwich, 1984). That edition arose out of a series of discussions in the early 1980s, in the Politics Department at the University of York, in the United Kingdom, about the way in which the undergraduate syllabus at York should be structured so as to introduce students most effectively to the discipline of Politics. It soon emerged in those discussions that one of the key issues which shaped the differences in approach to the content and structure of an undergraduate degree was that many, if not all, of us had very different understandings of what ‘politics’ is, and what it is not. To new students coming afresh to the discipline, that might seem surprising, but not so to colleagues and older hands, since any experienced academic in this field will know that the conception of politics one adopts directly influences not only the questions one asks but also the framework of analysis one uses and also, to some degree, one’s political practices. And so it seemed that it might be fruitful if we could articulate more sharply, and at some length, what these different conceptions of politics were. Our hope was that this would, at least, help to clarify such distinctions while at the same time revealing where they overlapped. But it was also hoped that a book of essays on the subject would serve the important purpose of introducing new students (at both undergraduate and graduate levels) to the range of approaches they would encounter (or should be aware of) in the discipline of Politics, Political Science or, under its now slightly older and perhaps more dignified title, of Government. The 1984 book was the fruit of those endeavours.

The book was widely used in the United Kingdom and elsewhere – in both Australia and South Africa, for instance – and was translated into Spanish for use in Mexico and other countries in Latin America. It went out of print in the early 1990s. Despite many requests for a new edition, there was simply not the opportunity to revise and republish it until recently when David Held and Louise Knight at Polity in Cambridge persuaded me to edit the present book.

As with the 1984 edition, the central aim of this book is to introduce readers coming to the formal study of Politics for the first time to some of the diverse meanings attached to the word ‘politics’. It is hoped that this will help them to situate their own understanding, studies and thinking in a wider comparative context of competing conceptions. Throughout, the use of the word ‘politics’, with a lower-case ‘p’, refers to the actual activity out there in the world, while the word ‘Politics’ (or Political Science), with an upper-case ‘P’, refers to the academic discipline, that is to the study of political life. With a primarily undergraduate readership in mind, all the authors have organized their contributions around one key question which forms the title of the book: what is politics?

A second objective of the book is to use these different conceptions of politics to stimulate debate amongst both students and staff, not only about the nature of politics as an activity, but also about Politics as a discipline. For there can be nothing more important for any discipline than regular and far-reaching self-appraisal of, and argument about, its essential focus and its fundamental concerns and approaches.

Three of the essays from the 1984 edition (by Alex Callinicos on the Marxist approach to politics, by Peter Nicholson on politics as force and by Albert Weale on politics as collective choice) have been retained, but each has been fully revised and updated. My own chapters (on thinking politically and the political approach to human behaviour) take forward some ideas outlined in the 1984 edition, but add new arguments. All the other chapters are new and the focus of each reflects a distinctive contribution to the continuing debate about the nature of politics. Though there was a chapter in the 1984 edition on politics as being about government, the new chapter by B. Guy Peters is about *governing*, which is conceptually wider and incorporates notions derived from the new institutionalism. Bernard Crick’s new chapter restates and advances the thesis he originally argued in his classic study *In Defence of Politics* that politics is a distinctive form of rule and that not all forms of rule are expressions of politics. Judith Squires offers a feminist conception of politics and

points out why and how this view has helped to broaden our understanding of the scope of politics and its inextricable link with relations of power, whether in or between societies or in the domestic domain. Neil Carter's account of the human–nature interaction as itself a political process amplifies this broad connection of politics even more, reminding us that human societies are an inextricable part of an environment. In another new chapter, Adam Swift shows concisely how important political philosophy is for understanding politics in its contribution to the development of clear thinking about complex issues, while Salwa Ismail offers a very important insight into Islamic conceptions of politics. She argues with great effect that simplistic western notions about a single Islamic understanding of politics (that it is inseparable from religion) are deeply flawed and that there is as much debate and variance in thinking about politics in Islamic discourses as there are in western ones. Finally, we have tended to think of politics as something that occurs within nation states and that international relations concern the relations between states. Tony McGrew shows in his new chapter that the interpenetration of national and international processes makes this distinction quite untenable.

It is possible to read each of these chapters and appreciate the distinctiveness of their individual conceptions of politics and hence the unique contribution which they each make to our definition and understanding of politics. But, equally, it is also possible to see overlapping concerns which converge on some common themes and, in particular, on power: its sources and forms; its uses, abuses and effects; how – if at all – power is distributed and constrained by norms, by competition, by rules, regimes and institutions and by other countervailing sources and centres of power, exercised by and through states and governments, private corporations or international organizations. But, as I shall argue in chapter 1, even while this underlying concern with power can be identified in the different approaches, it is still possible to classify them, broadly, in terms of the boundaries they draw around their definitions of the sites and scope of politics.

My first and major acknowledgement must be to all the contributors to this volume. They have cooperated wonderfully in its production. They were open-minded and uncomplaining in the face of my editorial badgering and suggestions and they directed their efforts whole-heartedly to meeting the central purpose of the book. My special thanks go to them. David Held, Louise Knight and Rachel Kerr at Polity together constitute the most generous, helpful and

efficient publishers one could ever hope for. Without their constant support and encouragement, projects such as these would not see the light of day.

#### **REFERENCE**

Leftwich, Adrian (ed.) (1984) *What is Politics? The Activity and its Study* (Oxford, Basil Blackwell).

# The Contributors

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**Alex Callinicos** is Professor of Politics at the University of York, where he has taught since 1981. His books include *Althusser's Marxism* (1976), *The Revolutionary Ideas of Karl Marx* (1983), *Making History* (1987), *Against Postmodernism* (1990), *The Revenge of History* (1991), *Race and Class* (1993), *Theories and Narratives* (1995), *Social Theory* (1999), *Equality* (2000), *Against the Third Way* (2001), *An Anti-Capitalist Manifesto* (2003), and *The New Mandarins of American Power* (2003). He is working on a book on the philosophical foundations of social criticism.

**Neil Carter** is Senior Lecturer in the Department of Politics, University of York. He has published widely on environmental politics and policy, British politics and public policy, including *The Politics of the Environment: Ideas, Activism, Policy* (2001). He is joint editor of the journal *Environmental Politics*.

**Sir Bernard Crick** is Professor Emeritus and fellow of Birkbeck College London, and also of University College London. He was knighted for 'services to citizenship in schools and to political studies'. He is author of *In Defence of Politics* (1962), *George Orwell: A Life* (1980), *Essays on Citizenship* (2000) and *Crossing Borders* (2001). He served as chair of an advisory group whose report led to Citizenship becoming a new compulsory subject in the national curriculum for England; and he was Adviser on Citizenship to the Department for Employment and Education in the United Kingdom until 2001. He was subsequently Home Office Adviser on Citizenship and chair of the 'Living in the United Kingdom' group on language teaching and useful knowledge for immigrants seeking naturalization whose report, *The New and the Old*, was published in September 2003.

**Salwa Ismail** is Senior Lecturer in Middle East Politics at the University of Exeter. Her recent publications include *Rethinking Islamist Politics: Culture, the State and Islamism* (2003) and a chapter on twentieth-century Islamic political thought in *The Cambridge History of Twentieth Century Political Thought* (2003). She currently holds an ESRC Research Fellowship and is undertaking research on urban politics in the Middle East.

**Adrian Leftwich** is Senior Lecturer in Politics at the University of York, England, where he specializes in the politics of economic development. His recent publications include *Redefining Politics* (1983) and *States of Development* (2000) and he has edited a number of books on politics and development, such as *New Developments in Political Science* (1990) and *Democracy and Development* (1996). He is currently working on a research study of the institutions of development.

**Anthony McGrew** is currently Professor of International Relations (and Head of Department) at the University of Southampton (UK). Research interests embrace globalization, global governance, international relations theory, and US foreign policy. Recent publications include *The Transformation of Democracy? Democracy beyond Borders* (1997), *Global Transformations* (with D. Held) (1999), *The Global Transformations Reader* (edited with D. Held) (2000), *Empire: The United States in the Twentieth Century* (2000), *Governing the Global Polity: From Government to Global Governance* (edited with D. Held) (2002) and *Globalization / Anti-Globalization* (with D. Held) (2002).

**Peter Nicholson** retired as Reader from the Department of Politics, University of York, in 2001. He has published on the history of political thought, and in particular on the political philosophy of the British Idealists.

**B. Guy Peters** is Maurice Falk Professor of Government at the University of Pittsburgh and Honorary Professor of the City University of Hong Kong. Among his recent publications are *The Future of Governing* (1996), *Success and Failure in Public Governance* (with Mark Bovens and Paul 't Hart) (2000) and *Institutional Theory in Political Science* (1999).

**Judith Squires** is Senior Lecturer in Politics at the University of Bristol. Her publications include *Gender in Political Theory* (1999) and *Feminisms* (co-edited with Sandra Kemp) (1997). Her current research interests focus on gender and citizenship, with specific reference to political representation and equality policies.

**Adam Swift** teaches Politics and Sociology at Balliol College, Oxford. He is the author of *Political Philosophy: A Beginners'*

*Guide for Students and Politicians* (2001), which pursues many of the points raised in his chapter, and *How Not to be a Hypocrite: School Choice for the Morally Perplexed Parent* (2003), which explores the moral dilemmas faced by parents choosing schools for their children.

**Albert Weale** has been Professor of Government and co-editor of the *British Journal of Political Science* at the University of Essex since 1992. His principal publications include *Political Theory and Social Policy* (1983), *The New Politics of Pollution* (with others) (1992), *The Theory of Choice* (1992), *Democracy* (1999) and *Environmental Governance in Europe* (with others) (2000). He has also published a number of edited works and papers.





# Thinking Politically: On the politics of Politics

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Adrian Leftwich

## 1 Introduction: Argument and Issues

What is politics? This apparently simple question is not as straightforward as it may first seem, and it raises many further and difficult questions. For example, is politics a universal feature of *all* human societies, past and present? Or is it confined to some types of society only and, if so, which societies and why? Is it possible that some societies have been, are or will be without politics? Is politics tied to certain sites, that is institutional arenas where it takes place? Is it solely concerned with issues and decisions affecting *public* policy, that is, the whole society? Or may politics be found in all groups and organizations, large or small, formal or informal? And how, if at all, is it to be distinguished from other social and economic activities? For instance, do wars, civil conflicts and revolutions represent extreme forms of politics? Or are they the result of the *failure*, or collapse, of politics? Does bargaining between businesses over prices and terms of contracts, or between managers and workers over pay and conditions, count as politics? Or are they simply expressions of economic processes in the form of market forces? Can they be both? And what of discussions in a family as to whether to redecorate the kitchen or go on holiday? Is that politics?

The issue can be taken further: is politics an activity which is confined to the human species alone? Or is it possible to detect politics (however rudimentary) amongst other species, as Frans de Waal argues in his entertaining book about power and sex amongst the chimpanzees, entitled *Chimpanzee Politics* (1982). In that book he defines and illustrates chimpanzee politics as ‘social manipulation to

secure and maintain influential positions' (de Waal, 1982: 212). His definition is not significantly different from Harold Lasswell's account of the study of politics as 'the study of influence and the influential', as set out in his classic book *Politics: Who Gets What, When, How* (1958).

While the last question is not one explored in this volume, all the others are addressed in different ways in an attempt to answer the organizing question of the book: What is politics?

But, to start, in this introductory chapter I wish to concentrate on three main issues. First, I provide some reasons why it is important to have an operational definition of politics. Next, I offer a preliminary way of distinguishing key elements in different views about politics, with some suggestions as to how readers might use these to develop their own views. I shall suggest that two broad approaches to the definition and conceptualization of politics dominate the debate. The first – the arena, or site, approach – holds that politics is an activity found only in certain kinds of societies (normally, those with states) and in certain kinds of institutional sites or processes *within* those societies. The second approach is the processual approach, which holds that politics is a much more generalized and universal process which has existed wherever the human species has been found (though it certainly takes many different forms), and hence is a characteristic and *necessary* feature, if not a function, of *all* societies, past and present: it always has been and always will be, and therefore stateless societies have politics, too. Finally, I explore some aspects of the characteristics of a 'discipline' (and the discipline of Politics in particular).

Throughout, my argument will be that because it is such a highly contested subject, debates about its proper definition and the scope of its subject matter are themselves political, and that it is not likely that there will ever be universal agreement on either what politics, as an activity, is or what the appropriate composition of the discipline of Politics should be. Nonetheless, it is possible to see a number of common concerns in all approaches which suggests, in turn, that there may be a little more common ground between them than at first appears to be the case. That common ground, I argue, is fundamentally their collective concern with the analysis of the origins, forms, distribution and control of power. And I suggest that the main differences in approach – though not the only differences – have less to do with disagreements about what politics is and more to do with explanatory differences about how politics happens, how it works, and especially how it is to be analysed, understood and taught.

## 2 The Need for a Definition

Why should we, as students of politics, need to think about its meaning – even in a preliminary and provisional way – and why should we be self-conscious about it? I think there are three main reasons.

### *A common discipline? The particular or the general?*

First, it is clearly and obviously important for students of any subject to be clear about what they think they are studying. The problem here, however, is that it may often appear that what is being studied as politics in one place seems very different to what is being studied elsewhere. For instance, students of Political Science in the USA are very likely to find themselves studying the American system of federal government; its political parties, interest groups, elections and public opinion; some major public policy issues and the nature, forms and even desirability of democracy. Students of Politics in the United Kingdom, on the other hand, where much of the discipline remains anchored to its two foundations in the study of political philosophy and political institutions, are more likely to be required to study some political philosophy (or normative theory) – perhaps Plato, Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Mill or even John Rawls. But they would also be likely to study United Kingdom political institutions and processes (and maybe the European Union), and rival interpretations of these, plus being able to choose option courses dealing with such areas as political ideologies, comparative politics (which might include the USA) and perhaps the politics of post-colonial states in the developing world. And in a South African university, by contrast, teaching may be more sharply focused on the history and character of South African politics and its institutions, perhaps also traditions in South African political thought, varying interpretations of the rise and fall of the apartheid system and the emergence of a new post-apartheid politics in the context of wider theories and the comparative analysis of democratization.

Even *within* these countries, students at different universities might find that their studies varied significantly. The extent of this variation might depend on whether they were only studying a few courses, or less, in Politics, or whether they were majoring in it. But it would also depend on what the particular academics, the faculty, chose to teach and believed students ought to know about. For instance, some students might have to do foundation courses on the basic concepts

and theories in Politics; others might have to study various methodologies for political research. In some departments, the emphasis might be on the scientific and quantitative analysis of politics, on measurement and empirical analysis, whereas elsewhere the approach might be more historical, normative, evaluative and qualitative. On the face of it, there appears to be a wide variation in what is taught under the formal subject called Politics, Government or Political Science. It is thus worth asking what common issues students of Politics from these three countries – and others – would be able to discuss, if they were to meet.

Such a problem would be far less likely to arise if medical students from those three countries were to meet. Though teaching methods might be different, and though attention to the local patterns of diseases and their treatment might vary from country to country, there would probably be a much more common and comparable grounding in the basic terminology, concepts and theories (the constituent sciences, so to speak) of medicine (such as physiology, anatomy, neurology and biochemistry, for example) which would enable such students to talk to each other about medical issues and discuss causes, diagnoses and treatments.

The question that arises, then, is this. In what way can it be said that students of Politics are studying the same thing, politics, and could they have a coherent and mutually intelligible discussion about it, as the medical students might? Or would they be talking past each other because each would have only a limited and partial understanding of the 'politics' and institutions of their own society and perhaps one or two others? Are there common constituent elements in the discipline of Politics which represent the basic explanatory tools for the analysis of politics? If so, what are they? In short, is there a common terminological, conceptual and theoretical apparatus which underpins the discipline? If there were, then it would not matter if American, British and South African students studied different forms and expressions of politics. They would still be able to have a coherent discussion about politics, using their own local or national studies of politics as illustrative material to demonstrate and compare the interesting ways in which deeper and wider patterns, theories and processes of politics are expressed in different ways in their different countries.

So the first question students of politics might want to ask themselves when thinking about the discipline and the activity is this: is my aim to understand the *particular* politics, policies and institutions of a given country or countries? Or do I aim to find deeper and wider *general* principles and processes of politics, if such exist, for which

these country studies are particular examples and expressions? In short, am I studying, or hoping to study, some kind of ‘science’ of politics in which there are general processes to be uncovered and analysed; or am I studying a particular, contingent and locally situated set of processes which is unique, *sui generis*, and illustrative of no wider underlying processes – for there are none? Putting it simply, is the study of politics a scientific endeavour which seeks to identify, on an explanatory and probabilistic basis, some *general* regularities, patterns and processes (if not laws) underlying *all* politics, as economists claim to do for economic activity, or as chemists might do for chemical reactions and interactions? Or is the study of politics a more humanistic, historical, normative and hence non-scientific exercise, concerned with the qualitative understanding and evaluative analysis (and moral judgement) of *particular* processes at particular times and in particular places? Or can it and should it be both, enabling these different forms and levels of analysis to complement each other (Birch, 2002: 22–257)?

#### *Definitions shape interpretations*

Second, it is important to recognize that any definition, conception or understanding of politics is likely to carry with it quite far-reaching implications for methodology. That is to say, the way one defines politics will significantly influence what one looks for and how one analyses politics, that is, the methodology of enquiry. And it is important to be self-aware about this, for any one approach is likely to exclude – at least in part – other approaches, other forms of measurement, evidence and explanation. An example will help to illustrate the point.

In the course of the 1960s, and more especially in the 1970s and 1980s, the system of racial domination in South Africa, loosely known as apartheid, came under considerable pressure. Internal resistance, sabotage of public installations, guerrilla incursions, strikes and stay-at-homes had intensified. External pressures, including war in Angola, boycotts of South African goods and sports teams, widespread and intensifying international condemnation, a decline in foreign investment and general cultural isolation, had increased. Yet the National Party government, which had ruled South Africa since 1948 and had deepened and militarized coercive racial domination, showed no sign whatsoever of serious reform or change. A Commonwealth investigation in the mid-1980s saw little prospect of liberalization, let alone democratization.

Then, with very little warning, on 2 February 1990, the new president of South Africa, Mr F. W. de Klerk, stood up in the South

African parliament, the House of Assembly, and effectively did, in Nelson Mandela's words, 'what no other South African head of state had ever done: he truly began to dismantle the apartheid system and lay the groundwork for a democratic South Africa' (Mandela, 1995: 666). Not only were political prisoners released, but banned political organizations (like the African National Congress, the Communist Party and the Pan-Africanist Congress) were legalized. It was made clear that negotiations would commence to create a new constitution for a non-racial and democratic political system. Within a few years, all the apartheid (racially discriminatory) legislation was abolished, new elections took place on the basis of universal suffrage and an African National Congress government assumed power under a new constitution in 1994.

Though there had been prior rumours that Mr Mandela and others might be released and that some minor reforms to the political system might be introduced, almost no one predicted that apartheid would be so fully dismantled. So the question is why did this happen? The answer is of course a political answer. But what kind of political answer? What were the politics that brought this about and how does one explain it? The manner in which one defines politics will strongly shape one's analysis of what happened and why. In considering three rival interpretations for the fall of apartheid, it is first worth bearing in mind some basic differences in approaches to political explanation.

Many explanatory approaches overlap and merge, but one major division is between those approaches which emphasize the role of *structure* and those which emphasize the role of *agents*. Structural explanations will look to broad features in the social, economic and political structures of a society, for instance in the level of industrialization, the growth of cities and the shape of social class structure (for example the size, wealth and interests of a business class, or the organization and power of the working class). A good example of a structural approach to politics comes from a recent paper on corruption: 'The many factors that contribute to corruption tend to be more common in poorer countries and in economies in transition than in rich countries. Thus, at some point in time, economic development reduces the level of corruption in a country' (Tanzi, 1998: 586). Note here the primary explanatory emphasis placed on structure, and the relative absence of mention of agents and institutions.

On the other hand, agency explanations will be more inclined to focus on the role of agents – individuals or even parties – in shaping political change. Certainly the 'great men or women in history' approach is illustrative of the agency approach, giving explanatory