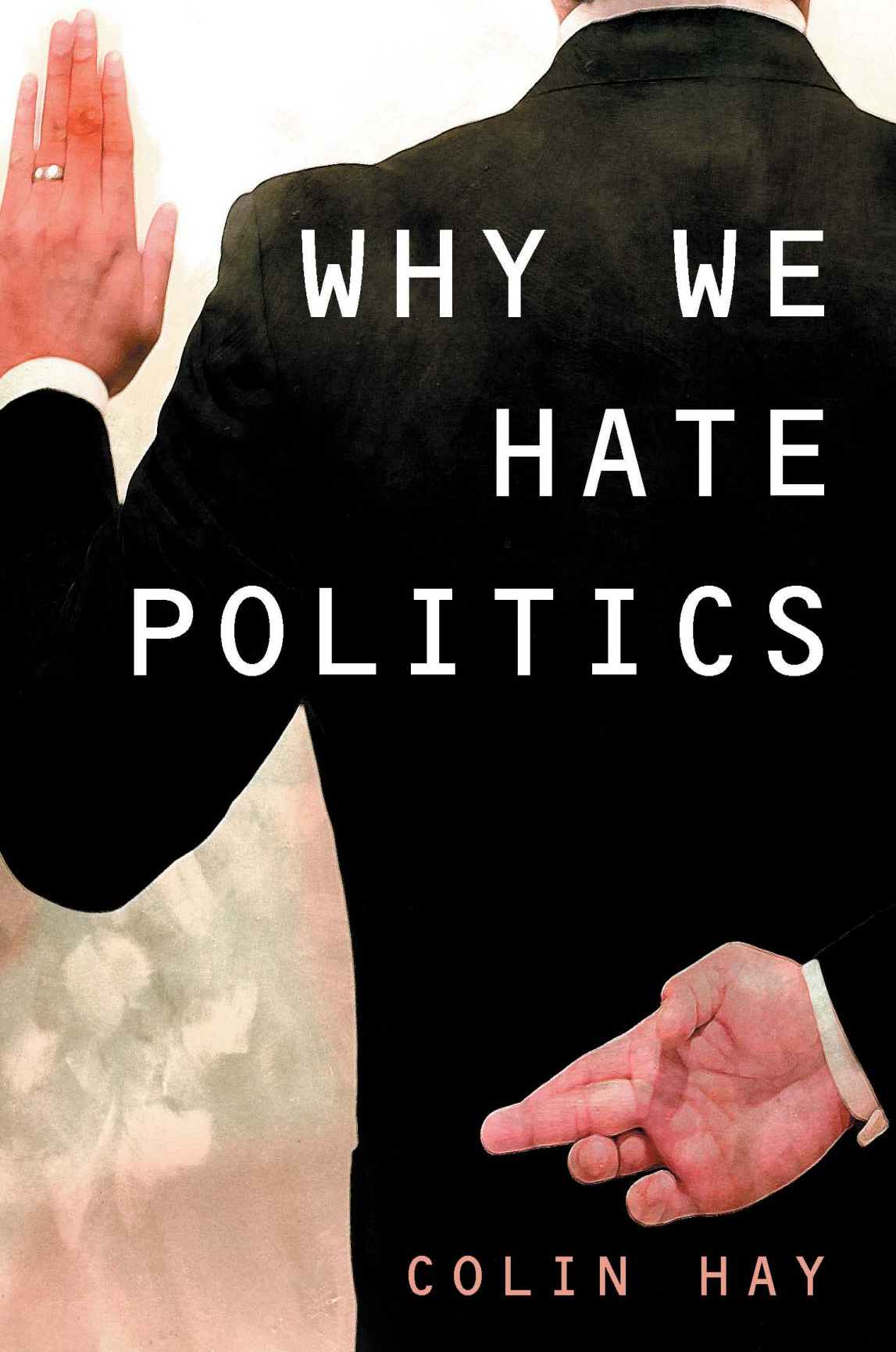

WHY WE HATE POLITICS

COLIN HAY

Why We Hate Politics

For Ailsa and Ian

Why We Hate Politics

COLIN HAY

polity

First published in 2007 by Polity Press

Polity Press
65 Bridge Street
Cambridge CB2 1UR, UK

Polity Press
350 Main Street
Malden, MA 02148, USA

ISBN-13: 978-07456-3098-4
ISBN-13: 978-07456-3099-1 (pb)

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Typeset in 11.25/13 pt Dante
by Servis Filmsetting Ltd, Manchester
Printed and bound in Malaysia by Alden Press, Malaysia

For further information on Polity, visit our website www.polity.co.uk

Contents

Figures and Tables

Figures

Tables

Preface and Acknowledgements

This book has taken rather longer to write than I had hoped, just like the last one, and the one before that . . . and, almost certainly, the one before that (I forget). When the idea for this book, or at least a book somewhat like this, was first put to me by Louise Knight, I was about to begin a three-year tenure as Head of the Department of Political Science and International Studies (POLSIS) at the University of Birmingham. I accepted enthusiastically the offer to submit a proposal, both because I was excited about the prospect of sorting out in my own mind the nature of the contemporary condition of political disaffection and disengagement and because this was the kind of book that I could imagine writing as Head of Department. That was to prove a forlorn hope. It has been far more difficult and more challenging intellectually to sort out my previously rather disparate thoughts on the issues addressed in this volume than I had thought likely. And the process has taken me in some genuinely new directions. It also became clear, rather early on, that I was profoundly naïve to think that I was going to write anything very much as Head of Department. But the book is probably better for its rather lengthy gestation. It is certainly the case that when I eventually sat down to consign my thoughts to paper at the start of my period of sabbatical in the Department of Government at the University of Manchester, I was far clearer about what I was seeking to do. The months that have followed have proved unusually cathartic.

As this perhaps already implies, I have, as usual, amassed a great variety of debts, both personal and intellectual, in writing this book. I must first thank my colleagues in POLSIS. It is not their fault that I failed to write this book whilst acting as their Head of Department – indeed, they have contributed greatly to making that a far less legitimate excuse for my inability to meet my publisher's deadlines than it would normally be in British higher education today. I must also thank my friends, new and old, in the Department of Government at the University of Manchester, who have accommodated my sabbatical but who have, by virtue of this book, seen rather less of me than they might have expected. Now that it is completed,

I hope to rectify that and to repay as best I can their generosity. An innumerable array of friends and colleagues have shaped, often unbeknownst to them, my ideas on the issues that I address in this volume. Amongst those who spring immediately to mind are the following, whom I thank profusely: Sam Ashman, Stephen Bates, Mark Blyth, Jim Buller, Pete Burnham, Keith Dowding, Alan Finlayson, Matthew Flinders, Andrew Gamble, Bob Goodin, Peter Hall, Andrew Hindmoor, Chris Howell, Laura Jenkins, Steven Lukes, Ross Maloney, Dave Marsh, Mick Moran, Pippa Norris, Craig Parsons, Ben Rosamond, Heather Savigny, Nicola Smith, Hugh Ward and Matthew Watson. It is almost inevitable that the day this book goes to press I will recall another dozen names that should be on this list – I thank them too, equally profusely – and trust that they will excuse my notoriously appalling memory. I am also immensely indebted to three anonymous readers for Polity, each of whose thoughtful, supportive and yet probing comments led to significant improvements, I think, in the final manuscript. I must also thank Louise Knight, Ellen McKinlay and, latterly, Emma Hutchinson at Polity. It was Louise who first put the idea to me for this volume, and I am immensely grateful to her for that – especially now that the book is complete! But I would also like to thank all three for their dedication, support and, above all, their enthusiasm for the project as it has developed and for their patience and perseverance. Whilst on the subject of patience and perseverance, this book, like all the others, would simply not have been written without the love and support of Elspeth. It is testimony to her generosity, kindness and tolerance that she has read almost every word and commented on almost every page.

Finally, it is now well over four years since the completion of my last single-authored book, *Political Analysis*. Since then I have become a father – twice. This book is, appropriately enough, dedicated to Ailsa (now four) and Ian (six months). I guess that, like any father and author, I hope that one day they will be interested to see what I have written. Yet I have one further hope – namely, that if they do, they will scarcely recognize the description of the condition of political disaffection and disengagement from which it builds.

Colin Hay
May 2006, Macclesfield

1

Political Disenchantment

Politics, or so it seems, is not all that it was once cracked up to be. Despite its near global diffusion, democracy motivates a seemingly ever smaller proportion of the electorate to exercise its right to vote in the states in which that right has existed the longest. Levels of electoral participation amongst the young are particularly low, and, it appears, each successive cohort of new voters has a lower propensity to vote than the previous one. Moreover, despite the bitter, often bloody and almost always protracted struggle to acquire the right to vote in free, fair and open elections, levels of participation in the new democracies are scarcely less depressing. Nowhere, it seems, does politics animate electorates consistently and *en masse* to enthusiastic participation in the democratic process. It should come as no surprise, then, that membership of political parties and most other indices of participation in formal politics are down – in established democracies to unprecedented levels.

For most commentators, this is depressing enough in itself.[1] Yet, arguably, such trends are merely the symptoms of a more worrying and deep-seated condition. For each individual pathology might be seen as indicative of a more pervasive – indeed, near universal – disdain for 'politics' and the 'political'. Once something of a *bon mot*, conjuring a series of broadly positive connotations – typically associating politics with public scrutiny and accountability – 'politics', has increasingly become a dirty word. Indeed, to attribute 'political' motives to an actor's conduct is now invariably to question that actor's honesty, integrity or capacity to deliver an outcome that reflects anything other than his or her material self-interest – often, all three simultaneously.

Politics and the collective good

There is, of course, a certain irony about this, the more detailed analysis of which will concern us throughout much of this volume. Stated most simply, politics responds to the need in complex and differentiated societies

for collective and ultimately binding decision making. In the language of rational choice theory, contemporary societies are characterized by the proliferation of so-called collective action problems to which politics is, in some sense, a response. A collective action problem exists whenever the common or collective interest of a group or society is not best served by the narrow pursuit by individuals of their own (perceived) self-interest. Facing pervasive environmental degradation, the pursuit of material self-interest by profit-driven corporations will, in the absence of a collective and authoritative decision-making body, result in the continued exploitation of the natural world. No individual corporation can afford to impose upon itself unilaterally the costs of environmental sustainability unless it is entirely confident that others will do likewise. Rationality at the level of the individual unit (here the corporation) translates into collective irrationality – an outcome, environmental degradation, from which all suffer. Politics, here in the form of an authoritative environmental regulatory agency, is capable (in theory at least) of providing a solution to such collective action problems, negotiating and enforcing a set of binding environmental standards and, in so doing, imposing collective rationality where otherwise it would not prevail.[2]

As this perhaps suggests, politics is concerned, almost by definition, with the construction and, ideally, the realization of a sense of the collective good. The contemporary association of politics with the pursuit of the material self-interest of politicians is, then, oddly antithetical to its very *raison d'être*. The prevalence of such attitudes raises a whole host of questions. Together these frame a considerable part of the analysis and argument to follow.

Amongst the most important of these are the following.

- Are electorates right to discern in contemporary politics an increase in the prevalence of instrumental, self-interested behaviour on the part of those vested with political power?
- Whether they are right or wrong to do so, how have electorates come to conceive of politics in this way?
- To what extent is politics today less able than it once was to provide solutions to collective action problems?
- Is any failure to supply political solutions to contemporary societal problems attributable to the nature, prevalence and character of such problems, to the quality, capabilities, motivations or moral calibre of politicians, or to the ideas which inform contemporary political strategy?

This, to be fair, is a far from innocent set of questions. There are a variety of ways of approaching these issues, and the agenda mapped out above is by no means neutral with respect to such choices. Indeed, there are no doubt hints as to the analysis to be presented in subsequent chapters in the questions posed, the order in which they are presented, and the manner in which they are expressed. Nonetheless, were we able to furnish ourselves with a complete set of answers to these questions, we would know a great deal about the nature of our current political predicament, the disaffection and disengagement to which it has given rise, and the character of politics more broadly. My aim in this book is to provide some answers to these questions. In so doing, I restrict myself, quite consciously and explicitly, to a consideration of the contemporary condition of the advanced liberal democracies. Whilst some of the answers that I offer may potentially prove generalizable beyond Europe, North America, South-East Asia, Australia and New Zealand, it is with these cases that I am principally concerned.

Dissecting disaffection: an agenda for political analysis

Tackling this list of questions, even for a limited number of cases, is no small task, however. And although political science has much to contribute to an analysis of each, as we shall see, it is a very long way from providing definitive answers to any of them. Moreover, despite a recent proliferation of literature concerned to identify the malaise afflicting the advanced liberal democracies, such questions remain rather further from the heart of contemporary political science than one might imagine. Indeed, part of the normative content of this book is the claim that political analysts should pay rather greater attention to this set of issues than they have tended to do to date. That is likely to prove contentious. It is justified in part by two potentially no less contentious claims.

The first is that political analysts should pay rather greater attention to the understandings of politics of 'real-world' political participants and non-participants. Such understandings change over time and are themselves highly consequential – becoming contributory factors in the development of the 'politics' they purportedly reflect. There is a danger, as with any specialist field of inquiry, that the analyst, whose inherent interest in the intricacies of the political is presumably not in doubt, simply takes for granted a similar level of innate interest on the part of political subjects more generally. As should now be clear, that would be a very grave mistake – and one

which can only distort the character of contemporary politics as it appears through the analyst's lens.

The second relates to the responsibilities of political analysts towards their chosen subject matter. It would, of course, be massively to overstate both the influence and the significance of contemporary political science to assume that it can bear any direct responsibility for whatever pathologies afflict the contemporary polity. Nonetheless, political analysts surely have some responsibility towards their subject matter – particularly, one might reasonably surmise, when it comes to diagnosing and seeking solutions to clearly articulated political pathologies. The contemporary condition of disengagement and disenchantment with politics itself is as clear an instance as one could conceivably imagine of such a situation. Yet it is a topic which has received somewhat less attention than this significance might lead one to expect (perhaps the most systematic treatment to date is that provided by Dalton 2004).

Moreover, as we shall see presently, political analysis is not, perhaps, as totally innocent as one might at first assume in the generation of this condition of disenchantment and disengagement. It is important not to overstate this role, but arguably the systematic questioning of the motives of political actors and public servants has its origins in the projection of instrumental assumptions on to such actors. This, in turn, can be traced to the development of public choice theory within political science in the 1960s and 1970s, and its growing influence on public policy from the 1980s. The extent to which such assumptions are true is an index of the degree to which it is irrational to trust politicians and public servants to act in the collective interest. Consequently, the extent to which such assumptions are believed is likely to be an index of the rational disengagement of the electorate from the political process. It would certainly seem as though public choice theory's cynicism with respect to the motivations of political actors is now deeply shared.[3]

Yet this is perhaps to get ahead of ourselves. Before we can diagnose the contemporary political condition, we need to know rather more about its symptoms. That is the principal task of this lengthy introductory chapter. In it, my aim is both to set out in some detail the problem to be explained in later chapters and to introduce the key themes of the volume as a whole. I do so by reflecting upon the associations and connotations of the term 'politics' in popular discourse. Such associations are suggestive of the complex and contested nature of the phenomena they serve to label. In recent years the term 'politics' has become synonymous, for many, with notions of duplicity, corruption, dogmatism, inefficiency, undue interference in

essentially private matters, and a lack of transparency in decision making. To label an activity or process 'political' is, it seems, invariably to deride and to distance oneself from it. This immediately raises a series of important questions about the nature and content of political processes and the place, purpose and value of political analysis today.

In this chapter I reflect upon the sense of political disenchantment that has arisen in recent years, seeking to trace its origins, gauge its extent, and assess the degree to which it might genuinely be seen as a recent phenomenon. I contrast the largely negative contemporary connotations of politics in popular discourse with the rather idealized depiction of politics as an arena of deliberation, public scrutiny, accountability and responsiveness which has tended to characterize the academic discourse about politics. If politics is, indeed, about holding power to account, how has it come to be associated with duplicity, corruption and undue interference? There are many reasons for this contemporary disenchantment with politics. However, two in particular are important in establishing the agenda for this volume. The first has already been alluded to – the rise of public choice theory and its natural affinities with neoliberalism. The second I have yet to mention – the challenges associated with globalizing tendencies. To the former's deep distrust of the inherent interventionism and inefficiency of political processes, the latter has added a plausible account of the ever diminishing capacity of political actors. The result is a profound crisis of both legitimacy and confidence in processes of political deliberation. Neoliberalism, informed by public choice theoretical assumptions, suggests the value of a tightly delimited political sphere which does not encroach upon the essentially private realms of economic and social exchange, encouraging a profoundly suspicious, sceptical and anti-political culture; the globalization thesis suggests the increasingly anachronistic nature of political intervention in an era of external economic constraint, inviting a fundamental reappraisal of the previously unquestioned capacity of political processes to shape societal trajectories. Both conspire to discredit the 'political' in contemporary societies, raising a series of questions about the nature of politics, the space for political deliberation in an era of globalization, and the role of political analysis in holding power to account. These issues frame the discussion of subsequent chapters.

Contextualizing political disenchantment

I started by noting that, if current levels of political cynicism, disengagement and disaffection with the political are anything to go by, then politics

is not all that it was once cracked up to be. Yet, from the outset, it is important not to get this totally out of proportion. There is plenty to concern us in contemporary patterns of political participation and non-participation without having to exaggerate the extent to which current trends are unprecedented historically.

Stated most bluntly, ostensibly democratic political systems require at least a minimal level of participation if the democratic legitimacy they claim is to be anything other than a façade. As Carole Pateman suggests, 'for a democratic polity to exist it is necessary for a participatory society to exist' (1970: 43). Arguably, levels of participation in at least some established and new democracies alike are low enough to give considerable cause for concern on this count. The picture is bleaker still if we allow ourselves a differentiated view of the democratic polity. For it is certainly no exaggeration to suggest that certain sections of the electorate – typically, in the established democracies and most obviously in the US, the black urban poor – are effectively disenfranchised altogether. Democracy is, for them, a privilege enjoyed by others; politics, an essentially external yet life-course-shaping imposition.

The point is that in making such arguments we do not have to rely upon the nostalgic construction of a mythical past of near total participation and near perfect democratic political legitimacy. Such a world never existed, politics has always had its detractors, and there have been other times when disdain and cynicism for politics have proved dominant. Indeed, John Dunn is surely right to note in characteristically sombre tones that politics has proved 'consistently disappointing'. Yet what is remarkable here – for Dunn at least – is less that politics should disappoint than that, given its tendency to disappoint, it should 'repeatedly nourish such high hopes' (2000: p. xii). Whether it will continue to nourish such high hopes is an interesting question. But, in so far as it has and does still, there is arguably something rather positive, even endearing, about this. That politics might continue to generate expectations that it can seemingly only ever fail to realize is testimony to a certain triumph of the human will over human capabilities. It also suggests a degree of political animation and engagement that has arguably both served to elevate levels of political participation in the past and is now on the wane. For Dunn, however, this triumph of hope over experience is less endearing than irritating. If we understood politics rather better, we would expect less of it. Consequently, we would be surprised and dismayed rather less often by its repeated failures to live up to our over-inflated and unrealistic expectations. We would, in turn, be better placed to set for ourselves political ambitions that we had some

chance of achieving. This may well be true, but such a rational recalibration of our expectations might also lead us to lose our sense of political ambition, animation and engagement. Indeed, does that not describe the contemporary political condition rather well?

If politics is not all what it was once cracked up to be, then we should not lose sight of the fact that for many it has never lived up to its billing and has always been rather less than it was cracked up to be. Indeed, as we shall see, a crucial factor in the development of contemporary political disaffection has been the growing political influence of those for whom politics is, at best, a necessary evil. This kind of argument does not differentiate between a past – in which politics was a good in itself – and the present day – in which it has become an increasingly malevolent force. In a sense, it is timeless and, so its proponents would contend, of universal relevance. What varies is not so much the content of the argument as its ability to shape attitudinal dispositions towards politics – and it is no more likely to mould such dispositions than when, as today, it has direct access to political power.[4] And whilst there is a certain irony about this capture of the political system by those committed to an avowedly anti-political agenda, it hardly lessens the significance or pervasiveness of the effects.

We would be wrong, then, to attribute current political disaffection solely to the critique of *contemporary* political personnel, their conduct and their motivations; it is just as much a product of a more general and timeless critique of politics as a practice or vocation. Similarly, we would be wrong to assume that the predominantly negative associations and connotations of politics today are unprecedented historically. Politics has been seen as the problem rather than the solution at various historical junctures. We might note, for instance, that all references to 'politics' in the work of Shakespeare are distinctly and overtly negative in their connotations. Not unrepresentative is King Lear's remark, 'Get thee glass-eyes, and like a scurvy politician, seem to see things thou dost not' (Act IV, scene 6). No less scathing is Hotspur's contempt for 'this vile politician Bolingbroke' (*Henry IV Part I*, Act I, scene 3). What is more, the association between Bolingbroke's vileness and his identification as a 'politician' is clearly not incidental – vileness is in the very nature of the 'politician'. Mine Host of the Garter in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* adds a further and possibly more familiar dimension to the odiousness of the politician in asking, 'Am I politic? Am I subtle? Am I a Machiavel?' (Act III, scene 2, all cited in Sparks 1994: 76). The capacity for manipulation, duplicity and deception is here added to a growing list of objectionable traits which set political actors apart from their peers.

It might, of course, be objected that, whatever its connotations, the term 'politics' was not employed in quite the same way in Elizabethan England as it is today. That is undoubtedly true, but it merely serves to demonstrate the timelessness of the critique of politics, however much the practice to which it refers may have changed over time. Thus Isaac D'Israeli's summary (cited in Crick 2000: 16), several centuries later, of what he took to be the pervasive misrepresentation of politics as 'the art of governing people by deceiving them' seems entirely in keeping with Shakespeare's attribution of Machiavellian motives to the political subject. That, of course, may be no coincidence. For the influence of Machiavelli's *Il Principe* (*The Prince*), published in 1513 – both for what it says and for what it is assumed to say – on the pejorative connotations of the 'term politics' is considerable.[5]

Yet, for present purposes, what is perhaps both most interesting and most easily forgotten about Machiavelli's writings is the extent to which they were part of a far broader reconfiguration of societal attitudes towards politics that was occurring in late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century Italy. In a number of key respects this parallels more contemporary developments. As Maurizio Viroli suggests, 'having enjoyed for three centuries the status of the noblest human science, politics emerged . . . as an ignoble, depraved and sordid activity: it was no longer the most powerful means of fighting corruption, but that art of conforming to, and perpetuating it' (1992: 1). In fact, two rather different conceptions of politics were at work here. The first, dominant until the late sixteenth century but with its origins in Aristotle, conceived of politics as the noble art of preserving the republic, largely through the subordination of sectional interests to the common interest of the community as a whole. Politics, in this conception (or discourse), was very much about the resolution of collective action problems and the delivery of public goods – such as security, social cohesion and societal well-being more generally.[6] The second conception, which gradually came to replace and supplant it was, strictly speaking, not a discourse of politics at all – but of *raison d'état*, literally 'reason of state'. Where the discourse of politics had drawn attention to the authentically political art of managing the republic to satisfy the collective needs of the many against the parochial desires of the individual, that of *raison d'état* highlighted a rather different and darker art – that of preserving *l'état*, the 'state'. By this was meant the art of stabilizing, insulating and crystallizing the political power and authority of a person or group (for Machiavelli, 'the prince') through the strategic deployment of access to, and control over, public institutions. Whereas politics had been concerned with the defence of the collective interest of society through the development of public authority,