What is Politics?

CHAPTER 1

'Man is by nature a political animal.'

ARISTOTLE *Politics*, 1

Politics is exciting because people disagree. They disagree about how they should live. Who should get what? How should power and other resources be distributed? Should society be based on cooperation or conflict? And so on. They also disagree about how such matters should be resolved. How should collective decisions be made? Who should have a say? How much influence should each person have? And so forth. For Aristotle, this made politics the 'master science': that is, nothing less than the activity through which human beings attempt to improve their lives and create the Good Society. Politics is, above all, a social activity. It is always a dialogue, and never a monologue. Solitary individuals such as Robinson Crusoe may be able to develop a simple economy, produce art, and so on, but they cannot engage in politics. Politics emerges only with the arrival of a Man (or Woman) Friday. Nevertheless, the disagreement that lies at the heart of politics also extends to the nature of the subject and how it should be studied. People disagree about both what it is that makes social interaction 'political', and how political activity can best be analysed and explained.

The central issues examined in this chapter are as follows:

Key issues

- What are the defining features of politics as an activity?
- How has 'politics' been understood by various thinkers and traditions?
- Does politics take place within all social institutions, or only in some?
- What approaches to the study of politics as an academic discipline have been adopted?
- Can the study of politics be scientific?
- What roles do concepts, models and theories play in political analysis?

Contents

Defining politics

Politics, in its broadest sense, is the activity through which people make, preserve and amend the general rules under which they live. Although politics is also an academic subject (sometimes indicated by the use of'Politics'with a capital P), it is then clearly the study of this activity. Politics is thus inextricably linked to the phenomena of **conflict** and **cooperation.** On the one hand, the existence of rival opinions, different wants, competing needs and opposing interests guarantees disagreement about the rules under which people live. On the other hand, people recognize that, in order to influence these rules or ensure that they are upheld, they must work with others - hence Hannah Arendt's (see p. 9) definition of political power as 'acting in concert'. This is why the heart of politics is often portrayed as a process of conflict resolution, in which rival views or competing interests are reconciled with one another. However, politics in this broad sense is better thought of as a search for conflict resolution than as its achievement, as not all conflicts are, or can be, resolved. Nevertheless, the inescapable presence of diversity (we are not all alike) and scarcity (there is never enough to go around) ensures that politics is an inevitable feature of the human condition.

Any attempt to clarify the meaning of 'politics' must nevertheless address two major problems. The first is the mass of associations that the word has when used in everyday language; in other words, politics is a 'loaded' term. Whereas most people think of, say, economics, geography, history and biology simply as academic subjects, few people come to politics without preconceptions. Many, for instance, automatically assume that students and teachers of politics must in some way be biased, finding it difficult to believe that the subject can be approached in an impartial and dispassionate manner. To make matters worse, politics is usually thought of as a 'dirty' word: it conjures up images of trouble, disruption and even violence on the one hand, and deceit, manipulation and lies on the other. There is nothing new about such associations. As long ago as 1775, Samuel Johnson dismissed politics as 'nothing more than a means of rising in the world', while in the nineteenth century the US historian Henry Adams summed up politics as 'the systematic organization of hatreds'. Any attempt to define politics therefore entails trying to disentangle the term from such associations. Not uncommonly, this has meant attempting to rescue the term from its unsavoury reputation by establishing that politics is a valuable, even laudable, activity.

The second and more intractable difficulty is that even respected authorities cannot agree what the subject is about. Politics is defined in such different ways: as the exercise of power, the exercise of authority, the making of collective decisions, the allocation of scarce resources, the practice of deception and manipulation, and so on. The virtue of the definition advanced in this text, 'the making, preserving and amending of general social rules', is that it is sufficiently broad to encompass most, if not all, of the competing definitions. However, problems arise when the definition is unpacked, or when the meaning is refined. For instance, does 'politics' refer to a particular way in which rules are made, preserved or amended (that is, peacefully, by debate), or to all such processes? Similarly, is politics practised in all social contexts and institutions, or only in certain ones (that is, government and public life)?

From this perspective, politics may be treated as an 'essentially contested' concept (see p. 19), in the sense that the term has a number of acceptable or legitimate mean-

Conflict: Competition between opposing forces, reflecting a diversity of opinions, preferences, needs or interests.

Cooperation: Working together; achieving goals through collective action.

ings. On the other hand, these different views may simply consist of contrasting conceptions of the same, if necessarily vague, concept. Whether we are dealing with rival concepts or alternative conceptions, the debate about 'what is politics?' is worth pursuing because it exposes some of the deepest intellectual and ideological disagreements in the academic study of the subject. The different views of politics examined here are as follows:

- politics as the art of government
- politics as public affairs
- politics as compromise and consensus
- politics as power and the distribution of resources.

Politics as the art of government

'Politics is not a science ... but an art', Chancellor Bismarck is reputed to have told the German Reichstag. The art Bismarck had in mind was the art of government, the exercise of control within society through the making and enforcement of collective decisions. This is perhaps the classical definition of politics, developed from the original meaning of the term in Ancient Greece.

The word 'politics' is derived from ***polis***, meaning literally city-state. Ancient Greek society was divided into a collection of independent city-states, each of which possessed its own system of government. The largest and most influential of these city-states was Athens, often portrayed as the cradle of democratic government. In this light, politics can be understood to refer to the affairs of the *polis* - in effect, 'what concerns the *polis*'. The modern form of this definition is therefore 'what concerns the state' (see p. 87). This view of politics is clearly evident in the everyday use of the term: people are said to be 'in politics' when they hold public office, or to be 'entering politics' when they seek to do so. It is also a definition that academic political science has helped to perpetuate.

In many ways, the notion that politics amounts to 'what concerns the state' is the traditional view of the discipline, reflected in the tendency for academic study to focus upon the personnel and machinery of government. To study politics is in essence to study government, or, more broadly, to study the exercise of authority. This view is advanced in the writings of the influential US political scientist David Easton (1979, 1981), who defined politics as the 'authoritative allocation of values'. By this he meant that politics encompasses the various processes through which government responds to pressures from the larger society, in particular by allocating benefits, rewards or penalties. 'Authoritative values' are therefore ones that are widely accepted in society, and are considered binding by the mass of citizens. In this view, politics is associated with 'policy' (see p. 400): that is, with formal or authoritative decisions that establish a plan of action for the community.

However, what is striking about this definition is that it offers a highly restricted view of politics. Politics is what takes place within a **polity,** a system of social organization centred upon the machinery of government. Politics is therefore practised in cabinet rooms, legislative chambers, government departments and the like, and it is engaged in by a limited and specific group of people, notably politicians, civil servants and lobbyists. This means that most people, most institutions and most social activities can be regarded as being 'outside' politics. Businesses, schools and other educational institutions, community groups, families and so on are in this sense 'nonpolitical',

Concept

Authority

Authority can most simply be defined as 'legitimate power'. Whereas power is the *ability* to influence the behaviour of others, authority is the *right* to do so. Authority is therefore based on an acknowledged duty to obey rather than on any form of coercion or manipulation. In this sense, authority is power cloaked in legitimacy or rightfulness. Weber (see p. 211) distinguished between three kinds of authority, based on the different grounds upon which obedience can be established: *traditional* authority is rooted in history, *charismatic* authority stems from personality, and *legal–rational* authority is grounded in a set of impersonal rules (see the section on legitimizing power, pp. 211–13).

Polis: *(Greek)* City-state; classically understood to imply the highest or most desirable form of social organization.

Polity: A society organized through the exercise of political authority; for Aristotle, rule by the many in the interests of all.

Niccolo Machiavelli (1469–1527)

Italian politician and author. The son of a civil lawyer, Machiavelli's knowledge of public life was gained from a sometimes precarious existence in politically unstable Florence. He served as Second Chancellor (1498–1512) [illegible] first-hand observations of the statecraft of Cesare Borgia and the power politics that dominated his period. It was written as a guide for the future prince of a united Italy. The adjective 'Machiavellian' subsequently

because they are not engaged in 'running the country'. By the same token, to portray politics as an essentially state-bound activity is to ignore the increasingly important international or global influences upon modern life, such as the impact of trans-national technology and multinational corporations. In this sense, this definition of politics is a hangover from the days when the nation-state (see p. 121) could still be regarded as an independent actor in world affairs. Moreover, there is a growing recognition that the task of managing complex societies is no longer simply carried out by government but involves a wide range of public and private sector bodies. This is reflected in the idea that government is being replaced by 'governance'.

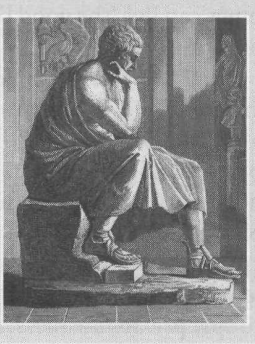
This definition can, however, be narrowed still further. This is evident in the tendency to treat politics as the equivalent of party politics. In other words, the realm of 'the political' is restricted to those state actors who are consciously motivated by ideological beliefs, and who seek to advance them through membership of a formal organization such as a political party. This is the sense in which politicians are described as 'political', whereas civil servants are seen as 'nonpolitical', as long as, of course, they act in a neutral and professional fashion. Similarly, judges are taken to be 'nonpolitical' figures while they interpret the law impartially and in accordance with the available evidence, but they may be accused of being 'political' if their judgement is influenced by personal preferences or some other form of bias.

Concept

Governance

Governance is a broader term than government (see p. 26). Although it still has no settled or agreed definition, it refers, in its widest sense, to the various ways through which social life is coordinated. Government can therefore be seen as one of the institutions involved in governance; it is possible to have 'governance without government' (Rhodes, 1996). The principal modes of governance are markets, hierarchies and networks. The wider use of the term reflects a blurring of the state/society distinction, resulting from changes such as the development of new forms of public management, the growth of public–private partnerships, the increasing importance of policy networks (see p. 406), and the greater impact of both supranational and subnational organizations ('multi-level governance'). While some associate governance with a shift away from command and control mechanisms to a reliance on consultation and bargaining, others argue that it implies a preference for 'less government' and the free market.

Aristotle (384–322 BCE)



Greek philosopher. Aristotle was a student of Plato and tutor of the young Alexander the Great. He established his own school of philosophy in Athens in 335 BCE; this was called the 'peripatetic school' after his tendency to walk up and down as he talked. His 22 surviving treatises, compiled as lecture notes, range over logic, physics, metaphysics, astronomy, meteorology, biology, ethics and politics. In the Middle Ages, Aristotle's work became the foundation of Islamic philosophy, and it was later incorporated into Christian theology. His best known political work is *Politics*, a study of the ideal constitution.

The link between politics and the affairs of the state also helps to explain why negative or pejorative images have so often been attached to politics. This is because, in the popular mind, politics is closely associated with the activities of politicians. Put brutally, politicians are often seen as power-seeking hypocrites who conceal personal ambition behind the rhetoric of public service and ideological conviction. Indeed, this perception has become more common in the modern period as intensified media exposure has more effectively brought to light examples of corruption and dishonesty, giving rise to the phenomenon of **anti-politics.** This rejection of the personnel and machinery of conventional political life is rooted in a view of politics as a self-serving, two-faced and unprincipled activity, clearly evident in the use of derogatory phrases such as 'office politics' and 'politicking'. Such an image of politics is sometimes traced back to the writings of Niccolo Machiavelli, who, in *The Prince* ([1531] 1961), developed a strictly realistic account of politics that drew attention to the use by political leaders of cunning, cruelty and manipulation.

Such a negative view of politics reflects the essentially liberal perception that, as individuals are self-interested, political power is corrupting, because it encourages those 'in power' to exploit their position for personal advantage and at the expense of others. This is famously expressed in Lord Acton's (1834-1902) aphorism: 'power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely'. Nevertheless, few who view politics in this way doubt that political activity is an inevitable and permanent feature of social existence. However venal politicians may be, there is a general, if grudging, acceptance that they are always with us. Without some kind of mechanism for allocating authoritative values, society would simply disintegrate into a civil war of each against all, as the early social-contract theorists argued (see p. 89). The task is therefore not to abolish politicians and bring politics to an end, but rather to ensure that politics is conducted within a framework of checks and constraints that ensure that governmental power is not abused.

Concept

Power

Power, in its broadest sense, is the ability to achieve a desired outcome, and it is sometimes referred to in terms of the 'power *to*' do something. This includes everything from the ability to keep oneself alive to the ability of government to promote economic growth. In politics, however, power is usually thought of as a relationship: that is, as the ability to influence the behaviour of others in a manner not of their choosing. It is referred to in terms of having 'power *over*' people. More narrowly, power may be associated with the ability to punish or reward, bringing it close to force or manipulation, in contrast to 'influence', which also encompasses rational persuasion (see the faces of power focus box, p. 11).

Politics as public affairs

A second and broader conception of politics moves it beyond the narrow realm of government to what is thought of as 'public life' or 'public affairs'. In other words, the distinction between 'the political' and 'the nonpolitical' coincides with the division between an essentially *public* sphere of life and what can be thought of as a *private* sphere. Such a view of politics is often traced back to the work of the famous Greek

Anti-politics: Disillusionment with formal and established political processes, reflected in nonparticipation, support for antisystem parties, or the use of direct action.

Concept

Civil society

The term civil society has been defined in a variety of ways. Originally, it meant a 'political community', a society governed by law, under the authority of a state. More commonly, it is distinguished from the state, and the term is used to describe institutions that are 'private' in that they are independent from government and organized by individuals in pursuit of their own ends. 'Civil society' therefore refers to a realm of autonomous groups and associations: businesses, interest groups, clubs, families and so on. Hegel (see p. 86), however, distinguished between the family and civil society, viewing the latter as a sphere of egoism and selfishness.

philosopher Aristotle. In *Politics,* Aristotle declared that 'man is by nature a political animal', by which he meant that it is only within a political community that human beings can live 'the good life'. From this viewpoint, then, politics is an ethical activity concerned with creating a 'just society'; it is what Aristotle called the 'master science'.

However, where should the line between 'public' life and 'private' life be drawn? The traditional distinction between the public realm and the private realm conforms to the division between the state and civil society. The institutions of the state (the apparatus of government, the courts, the police, the army, the social-security system and so forth) can be regarded as 'public' in the sense that they are responsible for the collective organization of community life. Moreover, they are funded at the public's expense, out of taxation. In contrast, civil society consists of what Edmund Burke (see p. 47) called the 'little platoons', institutions such as the family and kinship groups, private businesses, trade unions, clubs, community groups and so on that are 'private' in the sense that they are set up and funded by individual citizens to satisfy their own interests, rather than those of the larger society. On the basis of this 'public/private' division, politics is restricted to the activities of the state itself and the responsibilities that are properly exercised by public bodies. Those areas of life that individuals can and do manage for themselves (the economic, social, domestic, personal, cultural and artistic spheres, and so on) are therefore clearly 'nonpolitical'.

An alternative 'public/private' divide is sometimes defined in terms of a further and more subtle distinction, namely that between 'the political' and 'the personal' (see Figure 1.1). Although civil society can be distinguished from the state, it nevertheless contains a range of institutions that are thought of as 'public' in the wider sense that they are open institutions, operating in public, to which the public has access. One of the crucial implications of this is that it broadens our notion of the political, transferring the economy in particular from the private to the public realm. A form of politics can thus be found in the workplace. Nevertheless, although this view regards institutions such as businesses, community groups, clubs and trade unions as 'public', it remains a restricted view of politics. According to this perspective, politics does not, and should not, infringe upon 'personal' affairs and institutions. Feminist thinkers in particular have pointed out that this implies that politics effectively stops at the front door; it does not take place in the family, in domestic life, or in personal relationships. This view is illustrated, for example, by the tendency of politicians to draw a clear distinction between their professional conduct and their personal or domestic behaviour. By classifying, say, cheating on their partners or treating their children badly as 'personal' matters, they are able to deny the political significance of such behaviour on the grounds that it does not touch on their conduct of public affairs.

Public	Private
The state: apparatus of government	Civil society: autonomous bodies: businesses, trade unions, clubs, families, and so on

Public	Private
Public realm: politics, commerce, work, art, culture, and so on	Personal realm: family and domestic life

Fig. 1.1 Two views of the public/private divide

Hannah Arendt (1906–75)

German political theorist and philosopher. Hannah Arendt was brought up in a middle-class Jewish family. She fled Germany in 1933 to escape from Nazism, and finally settled in the USA, where her major work was produced. Her wide-ranging, even idiosyncratic, writing was influenced by the existentialism of Heidegger (1889–1976) and Jaspers (1883–1969); she described it as 'thinking without barriers'. Her major works include *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), *The Human Condition* (1958), *On Revolution* (1963) and *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1963), which she described as a study of the 'banality of evil'.

The view of politics as an essentially 'public' activity has generated both positive and negative images. In a tradition dating back to Aristotle, politics has been seen as a noble and enlightened activity precisely because of its 'public' character. This position was firmly endorsed by Hannah Arendt, who argued in *The Human Condition* (1958) that politics is the most important form of human activity because it involves interaction amongst free and equal citizens. It thus gives meaning to life and affirms the uniqueness of each individual. Theorists such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau (see p. 75) and John Stuart Mill (see p. 46) who portrayed political participation as a good in itself have drawn similar conclusions. Rousseau argued that only through the direct and continuous participation of all citizens in political life can the state be bound to the common good, or what he called the 'general will' (see p. 74). In Mill's view, involvement in 'public' affairs is educational in that it promotes the personal, moral and intellectual development of the individual.

In sharp contrast, however, politics as public activity has also been portrayed as a form of unwanted interference. Liberal theorists in particular have exhibited a preference for civil society over the state, on the grounds that 'private' life is a realm of choice, personal freedom and individual responsibility. This is most clearly demonstrated by attempts to narrow the realm of 'the political', commonly expressed as the wish to 'keep politics out of private activities such as business, sport and family life. From this point of view, politics is unwholesome quite simply because it prevents people acting as they choose. For example, it may interfere with how firms conduct their business, or with how and with whom we play sports, or with how we bring up our children.

Politics as compromise and consensus

The third conception of politics relates not so much to the arena within which politics is conducted as to the way in which decisions are made. Specifically, politics is seen as a particular means of resolving conflict: that is, by compromise, conciliation and negotiation, rather than through force and naked power. This is what is implied when politics is portrayed as 'the art of the possible'. Such a definition is inherent in the everyday use of the term. For instance, the description of a solution to a problem as a 'political' solution implies peaceful debate and arbitration, as opposed to what is often called a 'military' solution. Once again, this view of politics has been traced

Concept

Consensus

The term consensus means *agreement, but it usually* refers to an agreement of a particular kind. It implies, first, a broad agreement, the terms of which are accepted by a wide range of individuals or groups. Second, it implies an *agreement about* fundamental or underlying principles, as opposed to a precise or exact agreement. In other words, a consensus permits disagreement on matters of emphasis or detail. The term 'consensus politics' is used in two senses. A *procedural* consensus is a willingness to make decisions through consultation and bargaining, either between political parties or between government and major interests. A *substantive* consensus is an overlap of the ideological positions of two or more political

back to the writings of Aristotle and, in particular, to his belief that what he called 'polity' is the ideal system of government, as it is 'mixed' in the sense that it combines both aristocratic and democratic features (see pp. 27-8). One of the leading modern exponents of this view is Bernard Crick. In his classic study *In Defence of Politics,* Crick offered the following definition:

> Politics [is] the activity by which differing interests within a given unit of rule are conciliated by giving them a share in power in proportion to their importance to the welfare and the survival of the whole community. (Crick, [1962] 2000:21)

In this view, the key to politics is therefore a wide dispersal of power. Accepting that conflict is inevitable, Crick argued that when social groups and interests possess power they must be conciliated; they cannot merely be crushed. This is why he portrayed politics as 'that solution to the problem of order which chooses conciliation rather than violence and coercion' (p. 30). Such a view of politics reflects a deep commitment to liberal-rationalist principles. It is based on resolute faith in the efficacy of debate and discussion, as well as on the belief that society is characterized by consensus rather than by irreconcilable conflict. In other words, the disagreements that exist *can* be resolved without resort to intimidation and violence. Critics, however, point out that Crick's conception of politics is heavily biased towards the form of politics that takes place in western pluralist democracies: in effect, he equated politics with electoral choice and party competition. As a result, his model has little to tell us about, say, one-party states or military regimes.

This view of politics has an unmistakeably positive character. Politics is certainly no Utopian solution (compromise means that concessions are made by all sides, leaving no one perfectly satisfied), but it is undoubtedly preferable to the alternatives: bloodshed and brutality. In this sense, politics can be seen as a civilized and civilizing force. People should be encouraged to respect politics as an activity, and should be prepared to engage in the political life of their own community. Nevertheless, Crick saw politics as an embattled and often neglected activity. He saw its principal enemy as 'the desire for certainty at any cost', and he warned that this is demonstrated in many forms, including the seductive influence of political ideologies, blind faith in democracy, the impact of rabid nationalism, and the promise of science to disclose objective truth.

Politics as power

The fourth definition of politics is both the broadest and the most radical. Rather than confining politics to a particular sphere (the government, the state or the 'public' realm) this view sees politics at work in all social activities and in every corner of human existence. As Adrian Leftwich proclaimed in *What is Politics? The Activity and Its Study* (1984:64), 'politics is at the heart of *all* collective social activity, formal and informal, public and private, in *all* human groups, institutions and societies'. In this sense, politics takes place at every level of social interaction; it can be found within families and amongst small groups of friends just as much as amongst nations and on the global stage. However, what is it that is distinctive about political activity? What marks off politics from any other form of social behaviour?

At its broadest, politics concerns the production, distribution and use of resources in the course of social existence. Politics is, in essence, power: the ability to achieve a desired outcome, through whatever means. This notion was neatly

that 'the personal is the political'. This slogan neatly encapsulates the radical-feminist belief that what goes on in domestic, family and personal life is intensely political, and indeed that it is the basis of all other political struggles. Clearly, a more radical notion of politics underlies this position. This view was summed up by Kate Millett in *Sexual Politics* (1969:23), in which she defined politics as 'power-structured relationships, arrangements whereby one group of persons is controlled by another'. Feminists can therefore be said to be concerned with 'the politics of everyday life'. In their view, relationships within the family, between husbands and wives, and between parents and children, are every bit as political as relationships between employers and workers, or between governments and citizens.

Marxists have used the term 'politics' in two senses. On one level, Marx (see p. 53) used 'politics' in a conventional sense to refer to the apparatus of the state. In the *Communist Manifesto* ([1848] 1967) he thus referred to political power as 'merely the organized power of one class for oppressing another' (p. 105). For Marx, politics, together with law and culture, are part of a 'superstructure' that is distinct from the economic 'base' that is the real foundation of social life. However, he did not see the economic 'base' and the legal and political 'superstructure' as entirely separate. He believed that the 'superstructure' arose out of, and reflected, the economic 'base'. At a deeper level, political power, in this view, is therefore rooted in the class system; as Lenin (see p. 77) put it, 'politics is the most concentrated form of economics'. As opposed to believing that politics can be confined to the state and a narrow public sphere, Marxists can be said to believe that 'the economic is political'. From this perspective, civil society, characterized as Marxists believe it to be by class struggle, is the very heart of politics.

Views such as these portray politics in largely negative terms. Politics is, quite simply, about oppression and subjugation. Radical feminists hold that society is patriarchal, in that women are systematically subordinated and subjected to male power. Marxists traditionally argued that politics in a capitalist society is characterized by the exploitation of the proletariat by the bourgeoisie. On the other hand, these negative implications are balanced against the fact that politics is also seen as the means through which injustice and domination can be challenged. Marx, for instance, predicted that class exploitation would be overthrown by a proletarian revolution, and radical feminists proclaim the need for gender relations to be reordered through a sexual revolution. However, it is also clear that when politics is portrayed as power and domination it need not be seen as an inevitable feature of social existence. Feminists look to an end of 'sexual politics' achieved through the construction of a nonsexist society, in which people will be valued according to personal worth rather than on the basis of gender. Marxists believe that 'class politics' will end with the establishment of a classless communist society. This, in turn, will eventually lead to the 'withering away' of the state, bringing politics in the conventional sense also to an end.

Studying politics

Approaches to the study of politics

Disagreement about the nature of political activity is matched by controversy about the nature of politics as an academic discipline. One of the most ancient spheres of

Plato (427–347 BCE)

Greek philosopher. Plato was born of an aristocratic family. He became a follower of Socrates, who is the principal figure in his ethical and philosophical dialogues. After Socrates' death in 399 BCE, Plato founded his own academy in order to train the new Athenian ruling class. Plato taught that the

intellectual enquiry, politics was originally seen as an arm of philosophy, history or law. Its central purpose was to uncover the principles upon which human society should be based. From the late nineteenth century onwards, however, this philosophical emphasis was gradually displaced by an attempt to turn politics into a scientific discipline. The high point of this development was reached in the 1950s and 1960s with an open rejection of the earlier tradition as meaningless metaphysics. Since then, however, enthusiasm for a strict science of politics has waned, and there has been a renewed recognition of the enduring importance of political values and normative theories. If the 'traditional' search for universal values acceptable to everyone has largely been abandoned, so has been the insistence that science (see p. 16) alone provides a means of disclosing truth. The resulting discipline is today more fertile and more exciting, precisely because it embraces a range of theoretical approaches and a variety of schools of analysis.

The philosophical tradition

The origins of political analysis date back to Ancient Greece and a tradition usually referred to as 'political philosophy'. This involved a preoccupation with essentially ethical, prescriptive or **normative** questions, reflecting a concern with what 'should', 'ought' or 'must' be brought about, rather than with what 'is'. Plato and Aristotle are usually identified as the founding fathers of this tradition. Their ideas resurfaced in the writings of medieval theorists such as Augustine (354-430) and Aquinas (1225-74). The central theme of Plato's work, for instance, was an attempt to describe the nature of the ideal society, which in his view took the form of a benign dictatorship dominated by a class of philosopher kings.

Such writings have formed the basis of what is called the 'traditional' approach to politics. This involves the analytical study of ideas and doctrines that have been central to political thought. Most commonly, it has taken the form of a history of political thought that focuses on a collection of 'major' thinkers (that spans, for instance, Plato to Marx) and a canon of 'classic' texts. This approach has the character of literary analysis: it is interested primarily in examining what major thinkers said, how they developed or justified their views, and the intellectual context within which they worked. Although such analysis may be carried out critically and scrupulously, it cannot be **objective** in any scientific sense, as it deals with normative questions such as 'why should I obey the state?', 'how should rewards be distributed?' and 'what should the limits of individual freedom be?'.

Objective: External to the observer, demonstrable; untainted by feelings, values or bias.

Normative: The prescription of values and standards of conduct; what 'should be' rather than what 'is'.

The empirical tradition

Although it was less prominent than normative theorizing, a descriptive or empirical tradition can be traced back to the earliest days of political thought. It can be seen in Aristotle's attempt to classify constitutions (see pp. 27-8), in Machiavelli's realistic account of statecraft, and in Montesquieu's (see p. 312) sociological theory of government and law. In many ways, such writings constitute the basis of what is now called comparative government, and they gave rise to an essentially institutional approach to the discipline. In the USA and the UK in particular this developed into the dominant tradition of analysis. The empirical approach to political analysis is characterized by the attempt to offer a dispassionate and impartial account of political reality. The approach is 'descriptive' in that it seeks to analyse and explain, whereas the normative approach is 'prescriptive' in the sense that it makes judgements and offers recommendations.

Descriptive political analysis acquired its philosophical underpinning from the doctrine of empiricism, which spread from the seventeenth century onwards through the work of theorists such as John Locke (see p. 45) and David Hume (1711-76). The doctrine of empiricism advanced the belief that experience is the only basis of knowledge, and that therefore all hypotheses and theories should be tested by a process of observation. By the nineteenth century, such ideas had developed into what became known as positivism, an intellectual movement particularly associated with the writings of Auguste Comte (1798-1857). This doctrine proclaimed that the social sciences, and, for that matter, all forms of philosophical enquiry, should adhere strictly to the methods of the natural sciences. Once science was perceived to be the only reliable means of disclosing truth, the pressure to develop a science of politics became irresistible.

The scientific tradition

The first theorist to attempt to describe politics in scientific terms was Karl Marx. Using his so-called materialist conception of history (see p. 53), Marx strove to uncover the driving force of historical development. This enabled him to make predictions about the future based upon 'laws' that had the same status in terms of proof as laws in the natural sciences. The vogue for scientific analysis was also taken up in the nineteenth century by mainstream analysis. In the 1870s, 'political science' courses were introduced in the universities of Oxford, Paris and Columbia, and by 1906 the *American Political Science Review* was being published. However, enthusiasm for a science of politics peaked in the 1950s and 1960s with the emergence, most strongly in the USA, of a form of political analysis that drew heavily upon **behaviouralism.** For the first time, this gave politics reliably scientific credentials, because it provided what had previously been lacking: objective and quantifiable data against which hypotheses could be tested. Political analysts such as David Easton proclaimed that politics could adopt the methodology of the natural sciences, and this gave rise to a proliferation of studies in areas best suited to the use of quantitative research methods, such as voting behaviour, the behaviour of legislators, and the behaviour of municipal politicians and lobbyists.

Behaviouralism: The belief that social theories should be constructed only on the basis of observable behaviour, providing quantifiable data for

Behaviouralism, however, came under growing pressure from the 1960s onwards. In the first place, it was claimed that behaviouralism had significantly constrained the scope of political analysis, preventing it from going beyond what was directly observable. Although behavioural analysis undoubtedly produced, and continues to

produce, invaluable insights in fields such as voting studies, a narrow obsession with quantifiable data threatens to reduce the discipline of politics to little else. More worryingly, it inclined a generation of political scientists to turn their backs upon the entire tradition of normative political thought. Concepts such as 'liberty', 'equality', 'justice' and 'rights' were sometimes discarded as being meaningless because they were not **empirically** verifiable entities. Dissatisfaction with behaviouralism grew as interest in normative questions revived in the 1970s, as reflected in the writings of theorists such as John Rawls (see p. 58) and Robert Nozick (see p. 96).

Moreover, the scientific credentials of behaviouralism started to be called into question. The basis of the assertion that behaviouralism is objective and reliable is the claim that it is 'value-free': that is, that it is not contaminated by ethical or normative beliefs. However, if the focus of analysis is observable behaviour, it is difficult to do much more than describe the existing political arrangements, which implicitly means that the *status quo* is legitimized. This conservative value bias was demonstrated by the fact that 'democracy' was, in effect, redefined in terms of observable behaviour. Thus, instead of meaning 'popular self-government' (literally, government *by* the people), democracy came to stand for a struggle between competing elites to win power through the mechanism of popular election. In other words, democracy came to mean what goes on in the so-called democratic political systems of the developed West.

Recent developments

Amongst recent theoretical approaches to politics is what is called formal political theory, variously known as 'political economy', 'public-choice theory' (see p. 276) and 'rational-choice theory'. This approach to analysis draws heavily upon the example of economic theory in building up models based upon procedural rules, usually about the rationally self-interested behaviour of the individuals involved. Most firmly established in the USA, and associated in particular with the so-called Virginia School, formal political theory provides at least a useful analytical device, which may provide insights into the actions of voters, lobbyists, bureaucrats and politicians, as well as into the behaviour of states within the international system. This approach has had its broadest impact on political analysis in the form of what is called institutional public-choice theory. The use of such techniques by writers such as Anthony Downs, Mancur Olson and William Niskanen, in fields such as party competition, interest-group behaviour and the policy influence of bureaucrats, is discussed in later chapters. The approach has also been applied in the form of game theory, which has been developed more from the field of mathematics than from economics. It entails the use of first principles to analyse puzzles about individual behaviour. The best known example in game theory is the 'prisoners' dilemma' (see Figure 1.2).

By no means, however, has the rational-choice approach to political analysis been universally accepted. While its supporters claim that it introduces greater rigour into the discussion of political phenomena, critics have questioned its basic assumptions. It may, for instance, overestimate human rationality in that it ignores the fact that people seldom possess a clear set of preferred goals and rarely make decisions in the light of full and accurate knowledge. Furthermore, in proceeding from an abstract model of the individual, rational-choice theory pays insufficient attention to social and historical factors, failing to recognize, amongst other things, that human self-interestedness may be socially conditioned, and not merely innate. As a result, a variety

Empirical: Based on observation and experiment; empirical knowledge is derived from sense data and experience.

Concept

Science, scientism

Science (from the Latin *scientia*, meaning 'knowledge') is a field of study that aims to develop reliable explanations of phenomena through repeatable experiments, observation and deduction. The 'scientific method', by which hypotheses are verified (proved true) by testing them against the available evidence, is therefore seen as a means of disclosing value-free and objective truth. Karl Popper (1902–94), however, suggested that science can only falsify hypotheses, since 'facts' may always be disproved by later experiments. Scientism is the belief that the scientific method is the only source of reliable knowledge, and so should be applied to fields such as philosophy, history and politics, as well as the natural sciences. Doctrines such as Marxism, utilitarianism (see p. 401) and racialism (see p. 116) are scientistic in this sense.

Focus on . . .

The prisoners' dilemma

Two criminals, held in separate cells, are faced with the choice of 'squealing' or 'not squealing' on one another. If only one of them confesses, but he provides evidence to convict the other, he will be released without charge, while his partner will take the whole blame and be jailed for ten years. If both criminals confess, they will each be jailed for six years. If both refuse to confess, they will only be convicted of a minor crime, and they will each receive a one-year sentence. The options are shown in Figure 1.2.

In view of the dilemma confronting them it is likely that both criminals will confess, fearing that if they do not the other will 'squeal' and they will receive the maximum sentence. Ironically, the game shows that rational behaviour can result in the least favourable outcome (in which the prisoners jointly serve a total of 12 years in jail). In effect, they are punished for their failure to cooperate or trust one another. However, if the game is repeated several times, it is possible that the criminals will learn that self-interest is advanced by cooperation, which will encourage both to refuse to confess.

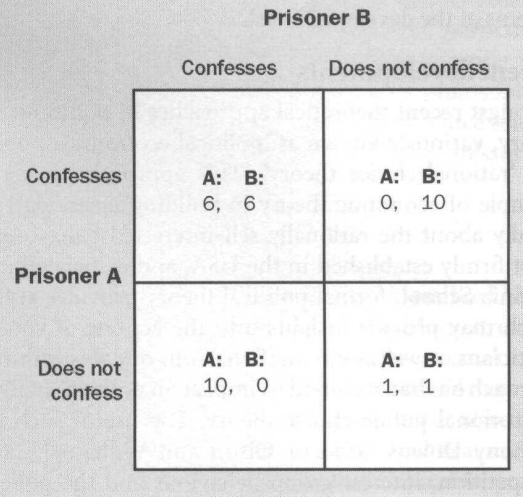


Fig. 1.2 Options in prisoners' dilemma

of approaches have come to be adopted for the study of politics as an academic discipline.

This has made modern political analysis both richer and more diverse. To traditional normative, institutional and behavioural approaches have been added not only rational-choice theory but also a wide range of more recent ideas and themes. Feminism has, particularly since the 1970s, raised awareness of the significance of gender differences and patriarchal structures, questioning, in the process, established notions of 'the political'. What is called 'new institutionalism' has shifted attention away from the formal, structural aspects of **institutions** to, for instance, their significance within a larger context, their actual behaviour and the outcomes of the policy process. Green politics has challenged the anthropocentric (human-centred) emphasis of established political and social theory and championed holistic approaches to political and social understanding. Critical theory, which is rooted

Institution: A well-established body with a formal role and status; more broadly, a set of rules that ensure regular and predictable behaviour, 'the rules of the game'.

in the neo-Marxism (see p. 92) of the Frankfurt School, established in 1923, has extended the notion of critique to all social practices drawing on a wide range of influences, including Freud and Weber (see p. 211). Postmodernism (see p. 65) has questioned the idea of absolute and universal truth and helped to spawn, amongst other things, **discourse** theory. Finally, a general but profoundly important shift is that political philosophy and political science are now less likely to be seen as distinct modes of enquiry, and still less as rivals. Instead, they have come to be accepted simply as contrasting ways of disclosing political knowledge.

Can the study of politics be scientific?

Although it is widely accepted that the study of politics should be scientific in the broad sense of being rigorous and critical, some have argued, as has been pointed out, that it can be scientific in a stricter sense: that is, that it can use the methodology of the natural sciences. This claim has been advanced by Marxists and by positivist social scientists, and it was central to the 'behavioural revolution' of the 1950s. The attraction of a science of politics is clear. It promises an impartial and reliable means of distinguishing 'truth' from 'falsehood', thereby giving us access to objective knowledge about the political world. The key to achieving this is to distinguish between 'facts' (empirical evidence) and 'values' (normative or ethical beliefs). Facts are objective in the sense that they can be demonstrated reliably and consistently; they can be proved. Values, by contrast, are inherently subjective, a matter of opinion.

However, any attempt to construct a science of politics must confront three difficulties. The first of these is the problem of data. For better or worse, human beings are not tadpoles that can be taken into a laboratory or cells that can be observed under a microscope. We cannot get 'inside' a human being, or carry out repeatable experiments on human behaviour. What we can learn about individual behaviour is therefore limited and superficial. In the absence of exact data, we have no reliable means of testing our hypotheses. The only way round the problem is to ignore the thinking subject altogether by subscribing to the doctrine of **determinism.** One example would be behaviourism (as opposed to behaviouralism), the school of psychology associated with John B. Watson (1878-1958) and B. F. Skinner (1904-90). This holds that human behaviour can ultimately be explained in terms of conditioned reactions or reflexes. Another example is 'dialectical materialism', the crude form of Marxism that dominated intellectual enquiry in the USSR.

Second, there are difficulties that stem from the existence of hidden values. The idea that models and theories of politics are entirely value-free is difficult to sustain when examined closely. Facts and values are so closely intertwined that it is often impossible to prise them apart. This is because theories are invariably constructed on the basis of assumptions about human nature, human society, the role of the state and so on that have hidden political and ideological implications. A conservative value **bias,** for example, can be identified in behaviouralism, rational-choice theories and systems theory (see pp. 19-20). Similarly, feminist political theories are rooted in assumptions about the nature and significance of gender divisions.

Third, there is the myth of neutrality in the social sciences. Whereas natural scientists may be able to approach their studies in an objective and impartial manner, holding no presuppositions about what they are going to discover, this is difficult and perhaps impossible to achieve in politics. However politics is defined, it addresses questions relating to the structure and functioning of the society in which

Discourse: Human interaction, especially communication; discourse may disclose or illustrate power relationships.

Determinism: The belief that human actions and choices are entirely conditioned by external factors; determinism implies that free will is a myth.

Bias: Sympathies or prejudices that (often unconsciously) affect human judgement; bias implies distortion.

Concept

Ideal type

An ideal type (sometimes 'pure type') is a mental construct in which an attempt is made to draw out meaning from an otherwise almost infinitely complex reality through the presentation of a logical extreme. Ideal types were first used in economics, for instance, in the notion of perfect competition. Championed in the social sciences by Max Weber, ideal types are explanatory tools, not approximations of reality; they neither 'exhaust reality' nor offer an ethical ideal. Weberian examples include types of authority (see p. 5) and bureaucracy (see p. 359).

we live and have grown up. Family background, social experience, economic position, personal sympathies and so on thus build into each and every one of us a set of preconceptions about politics and the world around us. This means that scientific objectivity, in the sense of absolute impartiality or neutrality (see p. 305), must always remain an unachievable goal in political analysis, however rigorous our research methods may be. Perhaps the greatest threat to the accumulation of reliable knowledge thus comes not from bias as such, but from the failure to acknowledge bias, reflected in bogus claims to political neutrality.

Concepts, models and theories

Concepts, models and theories are the tools of political analysis. However, as with most things in politics, the analytical tools must be used with care. First, let us consider concepts. A concept is a general idea about something, usually expressed in a single word or a short phrase. A concept is more than a proper noun or the name of a thing. There is, for example, a difference between talking about a cat (a particular and unique cat) and having a concept of a 'cat' (the idea of a cat). The concept of a cat is not a 'thing' but an 'idea', an idea composed of the various attributes that give a cat its distinctive character: 'a furry mammal', 'small', 'domesticated', 'catches rats and mice', and so on. The concept of 'equality' is thus a principle or ideal. This is different from using the term to say that a runner has 'equalled' a world record, or that an inheritance is to be shared 'equally' between two brothers. In the same way, the concept of 'presidency' refers not to any specific president, but rather to a set of ideas about the organization of executive power.

What, then, is the value of concepts? Concepts are the tools with which we think, criticize, argue, explain and analyse. Merely perceiving the external world does not in itself give us knowledge about it. In order to make sense of the world we must, in a sense, impose meaning upon it, and this we do through the construction of concepts. Quite simply, to treat a cat as a cat, we must first have a concept of what it is. Concepts also help us to classify objects by recognizing that they have similar forms or similar properties. A cat, for instance, is a member of the class of 'cats'. Concepts are therefore 'general': they can relate to a number of objects, indeed to any object that complies with the characteristics of the general idea itself. It is no exaggeration to say that our knowledge of the political world is built up through developing and refining concepts that help us make sense of that world. Concepts, in that sense, are the building blocks of human knowledge.

Nevertheless, concepts can also be slippery customers. In the first place, the political reality we seek to understand is constantly shifting and is highly complex. There is always the danger that concepts such as 'democracy', 'human rights' and 'capitalism' will be more rounded and coherent than the unshapely realities they seek to describe. Max Weber tried to overcome this problem by recognizing particular concepts as 'ideal types'. This view implies that the concepts we use are constructed by singling out certain basic or central features of the phenomenon in question, which means that other features are downgraded or ignored altogether. The concept of 'revolution' can be regarded as an ideal type in this sense, in that it draws attention to a process of fundamental and usually violent political change. It thus helps us make sense of, say, the 1789 French Revolution and the eastern European revolutions of 1989-91 by highlighting important parallels between them. The concept must nevertheless be used with care because it can also conceal vital differences, and

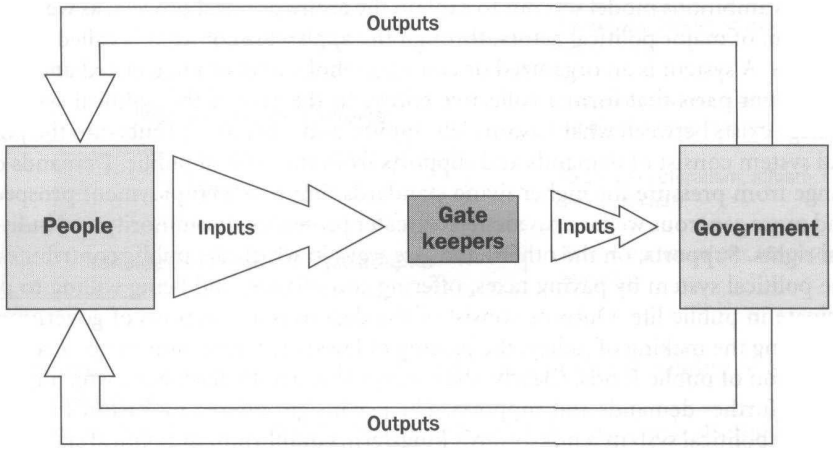


Fig. 1.3 The political system

thereby distort understanding - in this case, for example, about the ideological and social character of revolution. For this reason, it is better to think of concepts or ideal types not as being 'true' or 'false', but merely as more or less 'useful'.

A further problem is that political concepts are often the subject of deep ideological controversy. Politics is, in part, a struggle over the legitimate meaning of terms and concepts. Enemies may argue, fight and even go to war, all claiming to be 'defending freedom', 'upholding democracy' or 'having justice on their side'. The problem is that words such as 'freedom', 'democracy' and 'justice' have different meanings to different people. How can we establish what is 'true' democracy, 'true' freedom or 'true' justice? The simple answer is that we cannot. Just as with the attempt to define 'politics' above, we have to accept that there are competing versions of many political concepts. Such concepts are best regarded as 'essentially contested' concepts (Gallie, 1955/56), in that controversy about them runs so deep that no neutral or settled definition can ever be developed. In effect, a single term can represent a number of rival concepts, none of which can be accepted as its 'true' meaning. For example, it is equally legitimate to define politics as what concerns the state, as the conduct of public life, as debate and conciliation, and as the distribution of power and resources.

Models and theories are broader than concepts; they comprise a range of ideas rather than a single idea. A **model** is usually thought of as a representation of something, usually on a smaller scale, as in the case of a doll's house or a toy aeroplane. In this sense, the purpose of the model is to resemble the original object as faithfully as possible. However, conceptual models need not in any way resemble an object. It would be absurd, for instance, to insist that a computer model of the economy should bear a physical resemblance to the economy itself. Rather, conceptual models are analytical tools; their value is that they are devices through which meaning can be imposed upon what would otherwise be a bewildering and disorganized collection of facts. The simple point is that facts do not speak for themselves: they must be interpreted, and they must be organized. Models assist in the accomplishment of this task because they include a network of relationships that highlight the meaning and significance of relevant empirical data. The best way of understanding this is through an example. One of the most influential models in political analysis is the model of the political system developed by David Easton (1979, 1981). This can be represented diagrammatically (see Figure 1.3).

Model: A theoretical representation of empirical data that aims to advance understanding by highlighting significant relationships and interactions.

Concept

Paradigm

A paradigm is, in a general sense, a pattern or model that highlights relevant features of a particular phenomenon, rather in the manner of an ideal type. As used by Kuhn (1962), however, it refers to an intellectual framework comprising interrelated values, theories and assumptions, within which the search for knowledge is conducted. 'Normal' science is therefore conducted within the established intellectual framework; in 'revolutionary' science, an attempt is made to replace the old paradigm with a new.

This ambitious model sets out to explain the entire political process, as well as the function of major political actors, through the application of what is called systems analysis. A system is an organized or complex whole, a set of interrelated and interdependent parts that form a collective entity. In the case of the political system, a linkage exists between what Easton calls 'inputs' and 'outputs'. Inputs into the political system consist of demands and supports from the general public. Demands can range from pressure for higher living standards, improved employment prospects, and more generous welfare payments to greater protection for minority and individual rights. Supports, on the other hand, are ways in which the public contributes to the political system by paying taxes, offering compliance, and being willing to participate in public life. Outputs consist of the decisions and actions of government, including the making of policy, the passing of laws, the imposition of taxes, and the allocation of public funds. Clearly, these outputs generate 'feedback', which in turn shapes further demands and supports. The key insight offered by Easton's model is that the political system tends towards long-term equilibrium or political stability, as its survival depends on outputs being brought into line with inputs.

However, it is vital to remember that conceptual models are at best simplifications of the reality they seek to explain. They are merely devices for drawing out understanding; they are not reliable knowledge. In the case of Easton's model, for example, political parties and interest groups are portrayed as 'gatekeepers', the central function of which is to regulate the flow of inputs into the political system. Although this may be one of their significant functions, parties and interest groups also manage public perceptions, and thereby help to shape the nature of public demands. In short, these are in reality more interesting and more complex institutions than the systems model suggests. In the same way, Easton's model is more effective in explaining how and why political systems respond to popular pressures than it is in explaining why they employ repression and coercion, as, to some degree, all do.

The terms **theory** and model are often used interchangeably in politics. Theories and models are both conceptual constructs used as tools of political analysis. However, strictly speaking, a theory is a proposition. It offers a systematic explanation of a body of empirical data. In contrast, a model is merely an explanatory device; it is more like a hypothesis that has yet to be tested. In that sense, in politics, while theories can be said to be more or less 'true', models can only be said to be more or less 'useful'. Clearly, however, theories and models are often interlinked: broad political theories may be explained in terms of a series of models. For example, the theory of pluralism (discussed in Chapters 4 and 5) encompasses a model of the state, a model of electoral competition, a model of group politics, and so on.

Theory: A systematic explanation of empirical data, usually (unlike a hypothesis) presented as reliable knowledge.

However, virtually all conceptual devices, theories and models contain hidden values or implicit assumptions. This is why it is difficult to construct theories that are purely empirical; values and normative beliefs invariably intrude. In the case of concepts, this is demonstrated by people's tendency to use terms as either 'hurrah! words' (for example 'democracy', 'freedom' and 'justice') or 'boo! words' (for example 'conflict', 'anarchy', 'ideology', and even 'politics'. Models and theories are also 'loaded' in the sense that they contain a range of biases. It is difficult, for example, to accept the claim that rational-choice theories (examined above) are value-neutral. As they are based on the assumption that human beings are basically egoistical and self-regarding, it is perhaps not surprising that they have often pointed to policy conclusions that are politically conservative. In the same way, class theories of politics, advanced by Marxists, are based on broader theories about

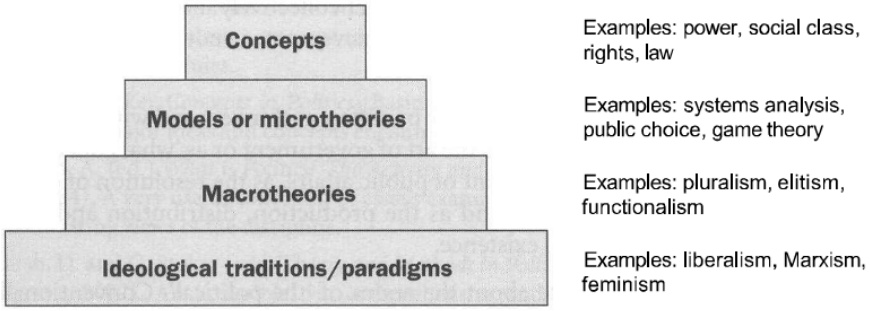


Fig. 1.4 Levels of conceptual analysis

history and society and, indeed, they ultimately rest upon the validity of an entire social philosophy.

There is therefore a sense in which analytical devices, such as models and microtheories, are constructed on the basis of broader macrotheories. These major theoretical tools of political analysis are those that address the issues of power and the role of the state: pluralism (see p. 78), elitism (see p. 80), class analysis, and so on. These theories are examined in Chapters 4 and 5. At a still deeper level, however, many of these macrotheories reflect the assumptions and beliefs of one or other of the major ideological traditions. These traditions operate rather like what Thomas Kuhn in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962) called paradigms. A paradigm is a related set of principles, doctrines and theories that help to structure the process of intellectual enquiry. In effect, a paradigm constitutes the framework within which the search for knowledge is conducted. In economics, this can be seen in the replacement of Keynesianism by monetarism (and perhaps the subsequent shift back to neo-Keynesianism); in transport policy it is shown in the rise of Green ideas.

According to Kuhn, the natural sciences are dominated at any time by a single paradigm; science develops through a series of 'revolutions' in which an old paradigm is replaced by a new one. Political and social enquiry is, however, different, in that it is a battleground of contending and competing paradigms. These paradigms take the form of broad social philosophies, usually called political ideologies: liberalism, conservatism, socialism, fascism, feminism and so on. Each presents its own account of social existence; each offers a particular view of the world. To portray these ideologies as theoretical paradigms is not, of course, to say that most, if not all, political analysis is narrowly ideological in the sense that it advances the interests of a particular group or class. Rather, it merely acknowledges that political analysis is usually carried out on the basis of a particular ideological tradition. Much of academic political science, for example, has been constructed according to liberal-rationalist assumptions, and thus bears the imprint of its liberal heritage.

The various levels of conceptual analysis are shown diagrammatically in Figure 1.4.