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INTRODUCTION TO POLITICAL SCIENCE

A Reading Text on
Politics and Governance

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Chapter 19 POLITICAL THEORY

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Introduction

The challenges of politics in the 21st century and the expected functions of government to meet up with the changing trends in governance in an era of globalization, necessitated the need to research into the history of political thought/political theory. Specifically, this chapter examines the meaning, origin, scope, relevance as well as challenges of political theory. Political theory, political science, political thoughts, and political philosophy are terms often used interchangeably to mean the study of philosophical texts related to politics, however it must be noted that there are few differences between these concepts. Data shows that a variety of political philosophers have combined political theory and political thought in order to understand politics: G.H. Sabine, in his book, *A History of Political Theory*, has included a detailed study of various political philosophers who assert their respective political thoughts, even though the title of his book relates to 'Political theory. (Sabine & Thorson, 1973)

Political thought encompasses the theories through which individuals attempt to explain each other's political behavior, the ideals by which they judge it, and the systems (such as laws) by which they attempt to govern it," writes Roger Scruton in his book *A Dictionary of Political Thought*. In other words, political thought is not so much concerned with revealing the truth in the manner of science, as with asking secondary questions about how knowledge is acquired and about how understanding is expressed (Das, 2011). However international political theory is concern with the nature of international politics, how it may be explained, understood and judged, it therefore focused on the theoretical texts and concepts of international politics rather than its empirical and historical material.

This chapter is structured into four seasons starting with the introduction. This is followed by exploring the conceptual clarification of terms in Political theory. The third section is based on origin, scope, relevance and challenges of political theory. Section four focuses on the conclusions.

Conceptual clarification

The concepts that are central to this study, and use interchangeably with

Political theory are Political science, political thoughts, and political philosophy.

Political theory

Political theory is a network of concepts and generalizations about political life involving ideas, assumptions and statements about the nature, purpose and key features of government, state and society, and about the political capabilities of human beings. (Heywood, 2004). It is largely an attempt to seek the truth as the thinker sees it, it does not mean the product of any particular period or the by-product of any single person or a few persons. In its simplest sense political theory means an interdisciplinary endeavor which lies at the heart of political science as an academic discipline. (Arisvatham & Misra, 2013). Its traditions, approaches, and styles differs, but the concept is united by a commitment to theorizing, criticizing, and identifying the norms, practices, and organization of political action in the past and present all around the world. The concept of political theory is view by scholars as a systematic body of knowledge that deals with political phenomena. To some, it is an individual view about political concepts, (Goodin, 2006). At the most general level, political theory is a body of knowledge related to the phenomenon of the state. This is to say that, political theory is not only concerned about the behavioral study of the political phenomena from an empirical point of view but also prescribe the goals which states, governments, societies and citizens ought to pursue. It generalized the right conduct in political life and about the legitimate use of power. It is neither pure thought, nor philosophy, nor science, it draws heavily from all of them, but distinct from them. (Johari, 2013)

Political theory is concern with the ideas and principles that shape the constitutions, governments and social life of citizens. (Nna-Emeka 2004). This shows that Political theory is discipline-based, confronted by a variety of political theories, each distinguished by a discipline on which it is based, and the task of political theory is not only to understand and explain but also to devise ways and means to change the society. Thus, we can say vividly that political theory recommends groups of action as well as means of reform, revolution or conservation. According to Sabine and Thorson (1973), it clarifies the meaning of concepts such as freedom, equality, justice, democracy, secularism and so on. It probes the significance of principles such as rule of law, separation of powers, judicial review, etc.

This is done by examining the arguments advanced by different thinkers in defense of these concepts. The purpose behind political theory is to dole out the explanation of politics as understood by a political theorist, which give rise to a number of political theories of the same period. Gauba (2007) states that Political theory is divided into rivulets such as classical, modern, empirical etc. The classical political theory was dominated by philosophy and dealt with the description, explanation, prescription and evaluation of the political phenomena; empirical political theory claimed to be a science and has been primarily concerned with the

description and explanation of the political reality. While contemporary political theory tries to blend the theoretical and practical aspects (Mukherejee & Ramaswamy, 2011).

Political science

Political science is the systematic study of politics and not its practice. Paul Janet, a distinguished French writer defines political science as one of the oldest among sciences and that part of social sciences that treats of the foundation of the state and the principles of government, as a discipline it is much more comprehensive than the term politics. According to Gettell political science is a historical investigation of what the state has been; an analytical study of what the state is; and a politico – ethical discussion of what the state should be. It includes both theoretical and practical or applied politics as well as different forms of speculation in politics e.g. political thought, political theory, political philosophy, political ideology, institutional or structural framework, comparative politics, public administration, international law and organization etc. (Arora, 2012).

Political science is the study of politics and power from domestic, international, and comparative perspectives. Political science looks out for resemblances and differences, for arrangement and classification, for cause and effect. (Ramaswamy, 2015). It assists people in the understanding of human relationships and political ideas, ideologies, institutions, policies, processes, and behavior, as well as groups, classes, government, diplomacy, law, strategy, and war. It is considered important because it stresses the analysis of life.

Political thought

Political thought has to do with the normative aspect of Political Science. It demonstrates the limits to Political Science. Political thought can be used loosely to cover any abstract thought about politics, law or society –It is the study of questions concerning power, justice, rights, law, and other issues pertaining to governance. **Political thought** asks how they have come about and to what effect. Just as Socrates' simple question 'How should we be governed?' led to his execution, the question 'What makes a government legitimate?' leads to political turmoil when posed at critical times. Political thought has no 'fixed' form and can be in the form of a treatise, speeches, political commentaries etc. What is important about political thought is that it is time-bound since the policies and programs of the governments change from time to time. It asks what form government should take and why; what duties citizens owe to a legitimate government, if any; and when it may be legitimately overthrown.

Generally speaking, political thought is the immanent philosophy of a whole age which determines its action and shapes its life. Political thoughts, addresses itself to two main tasks. First, it is concerned with the critical evaluation of political beliefs.

paying attention to both inductive and deductive forms of reasoning. Secondly, it attempts to clarify and refine the concepts employed in political discourse. (Mukherjee & Ramaswamy, 2011). Furthermore, political thought has been described as man's attempt to consciously understand and solve the problems of his group life and organization. Sabine and Thorson (1973: 3) described it as an intellectual tradition whose history consists of the evolution of men's thoughts about political problems over time. It is the disciplined investigation of political problems which has over the centuries attracted inquiries from political philosophers such as Plato, Aristotle, St Augustine, Machiavelli, Karl Marx and many others. (Williams, 1985).

Political philosophy

Philosophy is thinking really on anything and everything, it searches for truth and wisdom. It refers the science of wisdom, wisdom about this world, man or God. This wisdom is all-inclusive and tries to explain everything. When this wisdom is applied to the study of political phenomena or the state, it is called political philosophy. Political philosophy belongs to the category of normative political theory. It is concerned with not only explaining what is but also what ought to be. When this search is on political topics, we call it political philosophy. Hence it may not necessarily have a theory to propose (Adam, 2002).

Political philosophy is a term which gives rise to confused thinking in studying the phenomenon of the state. To some English political thinker, political philosophy is the major portion of political science, that part of philosophy which deal with the state which is a part of the universe with which philosophy proper is concerned. J.H. Hallowell says that political philosophy is not concerned so much with political institution as with the ideas and aspirations that are embodied in institutions.

Origin of Political theory

The origin of political theory began in ancient Rome and Greece. Approximately 600 BCE, thinkers in these societies began to consider questions of how to organize societies, as part of their broad considerations of ethics and how to live a good life. (Adeyemi, & Adeyinka, 2003). As religion retreats from its medieval heights and its influence on political affairs lessens, and science continues to unravel the mysteries of the universe, the central intellectual force of the modern era is reason. with the profound implication for political theory that authority must be justified; political authority must be shown to benefit society on the basis of rational argument. This attempts to explain why we need the state became central to modern political theory, and along with these, exploration of important related questions, for example, about the kind of state we need begin to emerge. (Sabine, 1973).

A book for our times indeed began to emerge hence the history of Political thought by George H. Sabine. This book was said to stand out as both for the authors conceptions of his subject and its execution as the best treatment extant of the whole

development of our political thought from its beginning to the present time.

Scope of Political theory

Great importance is imparted to the scope which various theories and thoughts have been able to encompass to influence various people. It has however been generally viewed that political theory stands for the ideas of an individual or a school of political thinking. This has created an individualistic view, in which each political theorist shapes his theory based on his or her speculations which may differ by varied amount. (Agarwal, 2008)

These variations could lessen the attraction to such theories, thereby reducing and narrowing the scope of political theory.

The scope on the other hand is further lowered because of the fact that they elucidate the present situation on the basis of some speculation.

These speculations are equally opened to criticisms, since they may be remote from the actual facts of the time, and hence it further lowers the scope of political theory in encompassing the views of the masses.

The relevance of Political theory

Political theory is relevant in the sense that it tries to understand, explain and analyze political phenomena and prescribe ways and means to rectify the shortcomings. It examines certain basic questions such as how society should be organized? Why do we need government? What is the best form of government? Does law limit our freedom? What does the state owe its citizens? What do we owe each other as citizens? It further thinks about the values that inform political life, such as freedom, equality and justice, as well explains the meanings and significance of other related concepts.

Political theory clarifies the existing definitions of concepts by focusing on some major political thinkers of the past and present. It examines the extent to which freedom or equality are present in the institutions that we participate in, such as schools, shops, buses or trains or government offices. It advanced further by looking at whether existing definitions are adequate and if existing institutions and policy practices are modified to become more democratic. The aims of political theory is to train citizens to think rationally about political questions and assess correctly the political events of our time. (Das, 2006). Varma, (2006) has identified the followings as the major relevance of political theory.

Control of Social Life: The scientific analysis of political life enables us to understand and solve the problems of our social lives. Just as the knowledge of geology, helps us to understand the causes of the earthquake and gives us insight for preventing the havoc caused by it, so political theory enables us to understand the causes of conflicts and violence in society and gives us insight for preventing their outburst.

Social Criticisms and Reconstruction: Political philosophy is primarily concerned with right and wrong, good and evil in social life. Political theory, therefore, gives us ample insight into the possible ills of social life and their remedies.

Clarification of Concepts: Political theory helps us a lot in the clarification of the concept used in the analysis of social and political life which is essential for the development of knowledge.

Formal Model Building: Political theory helps in devising formal models of political processes similar to the ones in theoretical economies. These models are explanatory in nature which offers systematically the factors on which political processes are based and they are also normative because they try to show the consequences that will accrue from following a certain rule.

Encourages Mutual Respect and Tolerance: The tradition of political theory encourages a dignified debate between scholars of a different point of view. When we follow the tradition of these political philosophers, it inspires us to understand each other's viewpoint, allows us to identify the strengths and weaknesses of our thoughts, and helps us to resolve our differences peacefully.

Challenges of Political theory

Political scientists suffer on account of non-existence of modern political theory for the 21st century: lack of coherence, direction, comparison, and empiricism in the discipline. Absence of a scientific theory hurts the status and self-respect of the academic community. As in many other disciplines, work in political theory has become increasingly specialized, and the gap amongst its component subfields, traditions and approaches continues to widen.

The followings are the major challenges of Political theory:

1. Interpretation challenge

The Challenges of Interpretation in Political Theory demonstrate that political theorists have and frequently display diversity of understanding in their interpretation of both political thinkers' and scholars' theories and their application in understanding contemporary political societies as well as in advancing policy recommendations on how to sanitize the political system. The most fascinating aspect of political theory, as well as the most difficult, concerns the problem of critical interpretation. However, the question of how to classify the views of political theorist's stands out the character of these great philosophers' political ideas is described in a variety of ways in commentaries on their ideas.

2. Critical appraisal challenge

Political theorists have the challenge of objectively examining political topics, scenarios, and events. The state's most important political institution, for example, has

been assigned several perspectives and functions. Some political theorists believe the state should act as a moralizing actor, while others disagree. Marxists believe that the state, which is nothing more than the executive arm of the bourgeoisie, should wither away as soon as the proletariat's dictatorship is established through the socialist revolution. This demonstrates a lack of agreement among political theorists on the role and purpose of the state, which presents a key problem.

3. Value based challenge

Over the years, there has been much debate on whether political theory should be fact-based or value-based. The Normative continued to hold on to value, but the Behaviouralists gained prominence for their emphasis on facts. (Biereenu-Nnabugwu, 2013). Political theory, especially normative typology, is value-laden in that it is prone to value judgments. It is also open to different points of view in the sense that political theorists look at political issues, problems, and solutions from many perspectives. While this may be viewed as a major source of strength for political theory and theorizing, it also presents a significant problem in the sense that diverse views in political theory and theorizing can introduce complications into political theorizing.

4. Background influence challenge

Political theorists originate from a variety of backgrounds, including environmental, ideological, and academic. They reflect and bring to bear, directly or indirectly, influences from their backgrounds when they engage in political thinking. This unavoidably provides a problem to political theory, as political theorists severely disagree on how best to structure and operate the political system, who should play what function, how and when, as well as the ideal system of governance.

5. Objectivity challenge

A universal desire and expectation is for objective socioeconomic and political experiments and analysis. The ability to assess evidence objectively is referred to as objectivity. It is a research or investigation that is conducted without regard for any individual's opinions, biases, hopes, or fears.

- 9. Unfortunately, there appears to be a reasonable degree of objectivity among political theorists in political theory. Their political ideologies are frequently informed and evidenced by their personal beliefs, quirks, motives, biases, and euro centrism. Bias, according to Biereenu-Nnabugwu (2013), obfuscates, blurs, or misdirects the true substance of a theory, whether hidden or obvious, latent or manifest; one example is the theory of political evolution.

6. Consistency and language challenges

A political theorist must be consistent in his views and utterances in order to be properly characterized. Johari (1987) underlined the need of a social and political theorist's views being totally coherent in order to justify their viewpoint. So that he can

be classified as an individualist, a socialist, an anarchist, or a communist with ease and safety. In terms of language, political theory, without a doubt, faces a language barrier. In the social sciences, particularly political science, phrases, words, and concepts are subject to multiple definitional studies and operational interpretations. Anikpo (1986), focusing on the same issue, found that attempting to properly define the meaning of development, for example, results in a barrage of rhetoric that, in the end, renders the terms scientifically useless.

7. Methodological challenges

Another important challenge for political theorists is deciding on the proper approach or plan to employ. This has posed a serious danger to political theory and research. This situation has sparked a lot of discussion in the political realm. The normative technique is advocated by some thinkers, whereas the empirical method is preferred by others. The crucial point to remember here is that both normative and empirical techniques and procedures are valid, useful, and relevant tools in the study of politics.

8. Abstractions use challenges

Political philosophy is rife with abstractions in most circumstances. Abstractions function similarly to mental constructs in that they allow theorists to convert mental representations into phrases or frames of reference. (Biereanu-Nnabugwu, 2013). Most of the time, the illustrations utilized in the theories are strange or foreign to political science readers and students, especially in Third World societies. Imitation of Western or Eurocentric ideals is encouraged by political theorist.

9. Lack of Funds challenge

It is altruistic that research is such a capital-intensive endeavor. Individuals, commercial organizations, governments, and other institutions must fund it and provide grants. Lack of finances and grants has thrown a spanner in the works of political theory, particularly in Third World developing countries (Agbaenyi, 2012).

Conclusion

In conclusion it is evident that political theory plays a critical role in laying out a path to the establishment of proper political organization and order in society. This distinction between political science, political thought, and political theory or political philosophy is generally observed by Continental writers, though it is difficult to point to the exact line of demarcation. Notwithstanding, the fact remains that these aspects are interlinked to each other in terms of explanation and understanding, they offer different information and knowledge in the study of political theory, political thought and philosophy respectively. Despite all of the criticisms leveled at political theory. Mahajan (1998) concluded that it is not dead; rather, it has undergone a change and continues to play an important part in our

modern society by assisting us in determining our goals through the application of political science.

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