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politics

second edition

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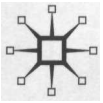

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For Mark and Robin

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Preface

THIS book provides a comprehensive and up-to-date introduction to the study of politics. It is designed to be of use to students taking courses in any field of the discipline, as well as general readers with an interest in the subject.

Politics stubbornly (and splendidly) refuses to stand still. The idea that history is 'speeding up' was not just a symptom of *fin de siècle* anxiety; in a sense, history *is* speeding up. For instance, the final decades of the twentieth century saw the collapse of communism, the end of the Cold War, the emergence of a global economy, a technological revolution in production and communications and the rise of political Islam. Indeed, we appear to be living in a kind of 'post-world'; ideas such as postmodernism, postmaterialism, post-Fordism, post-socialism and postindustrialism vie with one another to demonstrate how much and which bits of the familiar world have now disappeared. And yet not all is flux and confusion. The pace of change may have increased, but certain aspects of social existence and important features of the political landscape have proved to be remarkably resilient to change. Therefore, while this book gives full weight to modern developments such as globalization, the growth of feminism and green politics, the upsurge of ethnic nationalism and the emergence of new social movements, conventional approaches to the discipline are not neglected, and the contribution of classical thinkers such as Plato, Aristotle, Marx and Mill is not ignored.

This second edition features wider discussion of a number of topics as well as additional boxed material and diagrams. These topics include the nature of globalization, the impact of the mass media and the advent of new forms of political communication, the 'third way' as an ideological project, regionalization, democratization, and the shift from government to governance. The book nevertheless continues to adopt a holistic approach that tries to bring out what is distinctive about political analysis as a whole, and also highlights concerns that are shared by all who are interested in the subject. In an attempt to bridge the political philosophy/political science divide, links are drawn between normative and empirical theory, and a genuinely international perspective is adopted in preference to a country-by-country or system-by-system one.

The book is organized around five central themes. Part 1 on the theories of politics examines the conceptual and methodological issues that underpin the study of politics, and thus serves as an introduction to theories and ideas that are addressed throughout the book. Part 2 on nations and globalization discusses the role and significance of the nation-state, particularly in the light of internationalization and the emergence of global politics. Part 3 on political interaction looks at links between the political and nonpolitical worlds and at channels of communication between government and the governed. Part 4 on

the machinery of government considers the institutional and political processes that affect both the nature of government and its style of operation. Part 5 on policy and performance analyses how policy affec

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?

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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.